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WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE STAR WARS GAME?

DARRAN JONES

The original sit-down arcade game. In the mid-Nineties before we were married, I dragged Melanie around every arcade in Porthcawl looking for it. (I eventually found it.)
Expertise: Juggling a beautiful wife, two gorgeous girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing:
Beyond Words
Favourite game of all time:
Strider

TIM EMPEY

Much more recent than what the others have picked, but I enjoyed *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* a lot.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go.
Currently playing:
Hades II
Favourite game of all time:
God Hand

ANDY SALTER

The *Star Wars* mod *Escape Velocity*. If you don't know *Escape Velocity* it was a 2D *Elite*-style game, think *Asteroids* with trading.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding:
RTR: Imperium Surrectum
Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

MARTYN CARROLL

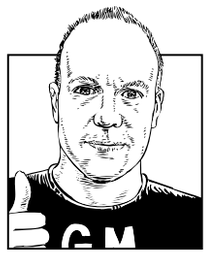
I love the Atari coin-ops based on the original trilogy, including – and especially – *Return Of The Jedi*. A different approach that captured the movie brilliantly for me.
Expertise: Spectrum stuff
Currently playing: *Rave Racer*
Favourite game of all time:
Jet Set Willy

RORY MILNE

There are so many great *Star Wars* titles that it's tough to pick just one. But Atari's *Star Wars* coin-op was my first taste of *Star Wars* gaming, and I still love it, so I'll go for that.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing:
Demon Attack
Favourite game of all time:
Tempest

ANDREW FISHER

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy on the Xbox 360 was so much fun that I had to 100% it.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing:
Steel Ranger 2
Favourite game of all time:
Wizball



GRAEME MASON

It's the original *Battlefront* for me – a great way to put yourself straight into the famous battles of the movies.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing:
Crisol: Theater Of Idols
Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4

PAUL DRURY

It can only ever be the original arcade game, in a cockpit cab. "Yahoo! You're all clear, kid". Heaven.
Expertise: Foam core
Currently playing:
Spica Adventure
Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space

LOADING...

Like many gamers of a certain age, the original *Star Wars* trilogy had a massive impact on me growing up. I watched the films as often as I could on VHS, had loads of merchandise and toys as a child and even collect high-end *Star Wars* figures today. My inner child is delighted that he's now able to go behind the scenes of two of the best games that celebrated those early films: *Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader* and *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy*. Each game is celebrated on the cover (one for subs, one for newsstand) and there's lots of fascinating information to discover about each of them.

I'm also excited to announce that Martyn Carroll has officially returned to the magazine as our new features editor. As many of you will know, Martyn was the original editor of **Retro Gamer** when it was owned by Live Publishing, so it's a real boon to have his expertise on the team again in a full-time capacity. It has been a difficult few months since the loss of Nick, but the addition of Martyn is making us feel like a team again.

Other highlights to look forward to in this issue include features on *Skyfox*, Brain Bug and *Batman*, as well as the games of the ZX81 and a look at Taito's *Space Gun*. We also review Bungie's new take on *Marathon* and look at the history of the underrated *Psyvariar* series.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine

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Nintendo

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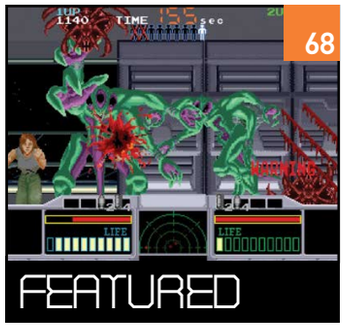

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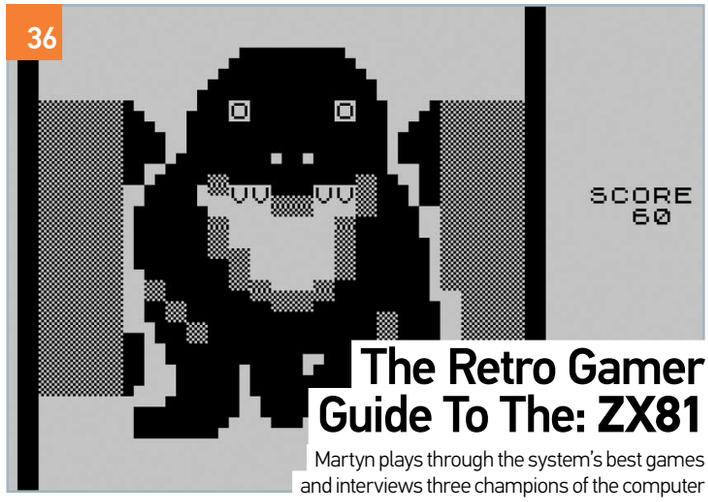

The Retro Gamer Guide To The: ZX81
Martyn plays through the system's best games and interviews three champions of the computer

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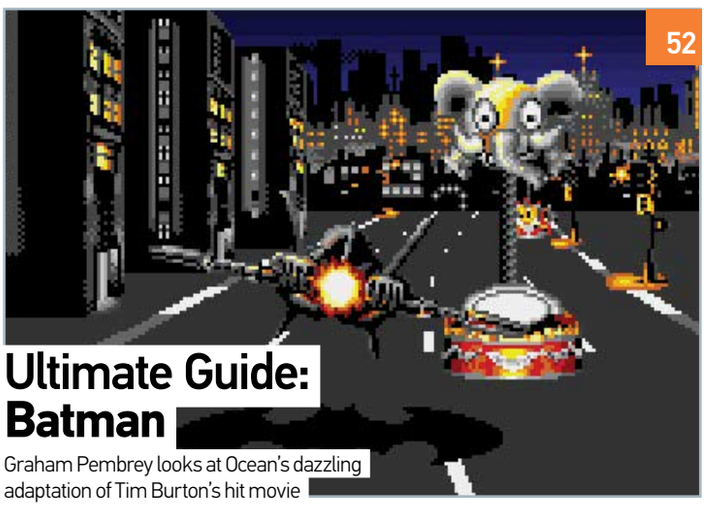

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Ultimate Guide: Batman

Graham Pembrey looks at Ocean's dazzling adaptation of Tim Burton's hit movie

» [NEOGEO AES+] Games like *Pulstar* cost an absolute fortune on the second-hand market, so the ability to buy an official version for £69.99 is very welcome.

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UPGRADING PERFECTION

Ben Jones on how PLAION is creating the ultimate Neo Geo

Words by Darran Jones

The Neo Geo is arguably one of the most iconic consoles of the Nineties. It delivered a home experience that was identical to what you'd find in the arcade and was the most technically advanced console of its time. Extravagantly expensive on release, the console and its most popular games are exorbitantly priced today, which hasn't been lost on Ben Jones and Bruno Steux. The pair have teamed up to create the NEOGEO AES+ and it's promising to be the ultimate take on the esteemed console.

So what makes it so special? Well, instead of using FPGA chips to recreate the classic console, Bruno has gone one step further. A professor of electronics, Bruno has helped design chips for both the automotive and defence industries. This knowledge has led to him recreating the chips that the original Neo Geo and its games used. This means PLAION's new console will not only be identical to the original in scale, but fully compatible with it as well. "This is the re-engineering of those classic chips that includes two on the machine, basically a CPU and a video chip, and also the cartridges," explains Ben. "The cartridge is quite a challenge. We've reworked all the chips in the cart and made two chips as the Neo Geo famously had two PCBs. There's a chip on one and a chip on the other."

SNK has been very good at making the Neo Geo and its games available to today's gamers, so what makes the NEOGEO AES+ so different to the mini consoles and arcade machines that are already on the market? "The feeling of plugging a cartridge into a dedicated machine rather than [the various competitors on the market] really concentrates your mind on it," offers Ben. "You get that authentic experience, especially with the controller, the clunk click. Back then, every cartridge mattered, and we want

> "Back then, every cartridge mattered, and we want to capture that feeling again"
> BEN JONES

» PLAION's NEOGEO AES+ will retail for £179.99 with a wired arcade stick. The white Anniversary Edition with a wireless white stick is £269.99.

» As you'd expect the included arcade stuck will be as authentic as possible as well, although wireless options will be available.

» £69.99 a game may sound expensive, but compared to the original games they're a bargain.

to capture that feeling again. It's as simple as that." If you need further proof of the authenticity that Ben and Bruno are striving for, it's worth talking about how the new system will connect to TVs. "We're going to include an RGB connector, so anybody that wants to play on a CRT can have that authentic experience," Ben proudly tells us. "Next to the RGB of course is the HDMI connector, which will obviously be used by the majority of people and will give that crisp 1080p 60Hz display that people expect nowadays." Bruno adds that it can also output 59.6Hz like an original AES if your TV can cater for it.

The NEOGEO AES+ may be using original chip sets, but that doesn't mean it won't be offering a few extra enhancements. While it won't feature modern save states or rewind functions, the size of the original memory cards is being improved. They're increasing in size from 2KB memory to 16KB memory. Ben has also confirmed that the AES will be able to save high scores, just like the original MVS could. "We are redirecting the high scores to the memory card, so when you boot it up, power down, boot it up, bam, it's there. So that is actually a quality-of-life option that wasn't available on the original machine."

As exciting as the NEOGO AES+ is, we're equally looking forward to the planned full-size cartridges. They'll cost £69.99 and ten titles are available at launch, with more hopefully on the way. We were personally expecting an Evercade-style cart with multiple games on it, similar to the Neo Geo X Gold, so this is an unxpected move.

"We want to replicate what happened back in the day and just bring out a game," clarifies Ben. "I always feel that once you start having these 200-games-in-one cart, ten-games-in-one cart, the games don't feel special anymore. You're just going through a list for maybe two minutes and that's it. You go on to the next one, because you've invested in the cartridge." We can certainly see the reasoning behind the decision for single carts, and as Ben points out, there's often a lot of depth to the included games which includes everything from *Shock Troopers* and *Metal Slug* to *Twinkle Star Sprites* and *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves*.

"Some could say on the face of it, that these are simplistic games," adds Ben, "they're not. They're deep. The score mechanics, the power-ups, how everything works often is just as complex as some modern-day games."

The new cartridges will look extremely similar to the original releases due to their key art and shockbox packing, but Ben feels that the release of the new console and carts won't upset existing Neo Geo collectors. "Whenever I've done something like this before, the value of the original carts went up," he explains. "Even though we're bringing out reissued versions of them, they've got slight differences, and the key art logos and logo placements on them are much more consistent for our ten games. Think of it like the *Harry Potter* books. It may be just £20 in Waterstones, but if you have a first edition *Harry Potter*, it's worth a lot more." And if there are any existing owners concerned that the release of these new carts will create a flood of opportunistic sellers trying to pass these new releases off as originals, Ben is confident that won't happen. "You won't be able to pass this off as original. It'll be totally obvious," confirms Ben.

While its November launch is quite a way away and it's a little more expensive than similar items on the market, we're very much looking forward to PLAION's new console. The Neo Geo has been out of reach of many fans due to its high cost and if this allows it to reach a new audience that can only be a good thing. ✱

» *Shock Troopers* never had an AES release (just MVS) so this is a real treat. *Big Tournament Golf* also adds the CD version's Scotland course.

» If you don't fancy a bulky arcade stick, the NEOGEO AES+ Gamepad will also be available at £44.99.

FEEL THE RHYTHM

Nintendo has just revealed that *Rhythm Heaven Groove* is due for release on 2 July. The *Rhythm Heaven* series debuted on the Game Boy Advance in 2006 exclusively in Japan, although later games made it to the West. *Groove* will be the first new game in a decade and promises to once again mix timing and rhythm into a bunch of enjoyable minigames. Look out for a review soon.

OCARINA TO RETURN?

News has been circulating that a remake of *Ocarina Of Time* is being planned. It makes sense as the *Zelda* franchise celebrates its 40th anniversary this year and *Ocarina* remains one of the greatest games in the series. A new *Star Fox* game has also been rumoured, which would certainly explain why he's popped up in the new *Super Mario* movie. More news as we get it.

Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

The FMV solution:

The making of NFL Blitz for Game Boy – part 2

Last month I explained how I signed a contract to create *NFL Blitz* for the Game Boy while visiting a McDonald's in Burlingame, California. This month I'll explain what my 'questionable' solution to making it feel more like a *Blitz* game actually was. If you can't tell by the included screenshot, I added tiny pre-canned FMV-style cutaways captured from the real game and questionably reduced them to a low-framerate, postage-stamp-sized window. I would love to say this was a clever design. It wasn't. Midway had provided the C source code from the original game, which would have been extremely helpful if I knew C. I did not. I knew exactly two languages: BASIC and Z80 assembly.

I reverse-engineered the playbook logic, which turned out to be a fairly simple table of actions. I rebuilt everything in assembly, matched the AI states, and pre-calculated the playbook data in world space. That part actually worked.

My coding style also left something to be desired. I didn't use labels. I memorised memory addresses and kept a tiny slip of paper listing where important variables lived. Later, when developers attempted to use my code as the basis for a sequel, they reportedly decided it was easier to disassemble the game and start over. That was a fair assessment.

Even with all that coming together, about halfway through development, Nintendo announced the Game Boy Color. Suddenly the project had to become a hybrid cartridge that ran on both the Game Boy and Game Boy Color. That was great! Because the Game Boy Color's faster CPU meant *Blitz* might finally run at something resembling actual speed instead of a polite slideshow about football. So that meant we had more time, right? Not at all. In those days before post-launch updates, the date was the date, and the date lived in stone. Retailers made orders, release windows were so locked that missing one was disastrous. Nope. We had to make it work.

So with all that in mind, here are a few highlights. Midway decided to send two quality assurance leads to be on-site to help me. When they landed and I picked them up, I let them in on my secret: I was working from a one-bedroom apartment and only at night. They were welcome to hang out, but don't bother my girlfriend. They somehow rolled with it and we became great friends.

At one point QA called and reported that safeties weren't working. I was at the mag. I cupped the phone, leaned over to a coworker, and whispered, "What's a safety?" I'm told I looked like someone had just vacuumed out my soul. Because in order to get that to work in, it would mean an incredible amount of work... and we had a week to go.

Somehow the game shipped. The reviews were not kind. But the game sold a ton of copies, which in the Game Boy market of the late-Nineties was the only metric publishers really cared about. Game Boy games were expected to be rough, by publishers and by players. I hated that thinking. I didn't want to make bad games.

But I did learn a few important lessons. First: three months is not enough time to make a Game Boy game. Or probably any game for that matter. (I would later make a game in eight weeks but that's another story). Second: sometimes the best thing you can do for your career is to simply say yes and figure it out later. And third: being naive might be the most powerful tool a creator can have. Because if I had known what I was getting into, I never would have walked into that McDonald's in Burlingame and signed that contract. *

> "I'm told I looked like someone had just vacuumed out my soul"

Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

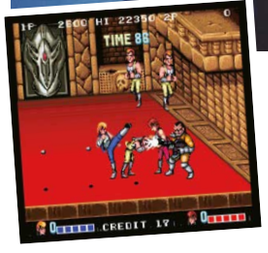
RetroGamerUK | retrogamermag.bsky.social | @RetroGamer_Mag | retrogamer@futurenet.com

YOSHIHISA KISHIMOTO: 1961–2026

THE CREATOR OF DOUBLE DRAGON AND THE KUNIO-KUN SERIES PASSES

The gaming world was dismayed to hear of the passing of Yoshihisa Kishimoto, the creator of classic games like *Renegade* (also known as *Nekketsu Koha Kunio-kun*) and *Double Dragon*, at the age of 64. The news was first shared by the likes of Time Extension, *Famitsu* and Retronauts after it was noticed that Kishimoto's son Ryūbō had posted about the loss of his father on Facebook. "I am sorry to inform you that my father has passed to rest on 04/02/2026," the post began. "Thank you very much for everything you have done for me during my life. Please forgive us that we will perform at the family funeral. I hope you will continue to enjoy my father's works, including *Kunio-kun*. Thank you."

Yoshihisa Kishimoto started his gaming career at Data East, where he worked on LaserDisc games such as *Cobra Command* and *Road Blaster*. He then moved to Technos where he found huge success with the first *Kunio-kun* game and the acclaimed side-scrolling fighter *Double Dragon*, before eventually working as a freelancer and later founding Plophet Co in 2010. When we interviewed him all the way back in issue 103 for The Making Of Double Dragon, Kishimoto explained to us that he was a bit of a delinquent in his youth and that experience, along with Bruce Lee's *Enter The Dragon*, became a big influence on his later games.



» Here's Kishimoto on the USA location test for *Renegade*. Photo credit: Florent Gorges.

» [Arcade] *Double Dragon* was massively popular on release thanks to its two-player gameplay and numerous weapons you could pick-up and use.

» Yoshihisa Kishimoto (left) and Florent Gorges playing a game of *Double Dragon*. Image credit: Florent Gorges.

Outside of our *Double Dragon* feature, Kishimoto's work has been well documented by Florent Gorges, who wrote a book about his career in 2012 called *Enter The Double Dragon* (in fact, it was Florent who first put us in touch with Kishimoto). "The first time I met him, his name was nowhere to be found online. Today, the entire gaming world is paying tribute to him," Florent told us. "He truly deserves it! Wherever he is now, he's surely very happy. Kishimoto-san, thank you, my friend, for all the time we spent together and the conversations we shared. I'm going to miss you."

As you'd expect the news has left a big impact on the industry, with veteran game developers sharing their respect for Kishimoto's work on various social channels. WayForward Technologies, who worked on later games in the *Kunio-kun* series said. "We are sorry to hear of the passing of Yoshihisa Kishimoto, creator of the legendary *Double Dragon* and *Kunio-kun* (*River City*) series. WayForward was greatly inspired by his works, and it was an honour to explore the universe he created."

While his games may not have been the first side-scrolling fighters, they were influential in shaping the genre and spawned numerous sequels, many of which are still available today via various compilations. Yoshihisa Kishimoto may no longer be with us, but the impact he made on the popular genre is immeasurable. Our thoughts go out to all of his friends and family at this difficult time. *

» [Arcade] *Nekketsu Koha Kunio-kun*'s look was drastically retooled for the West and was renamed *Renegade*.

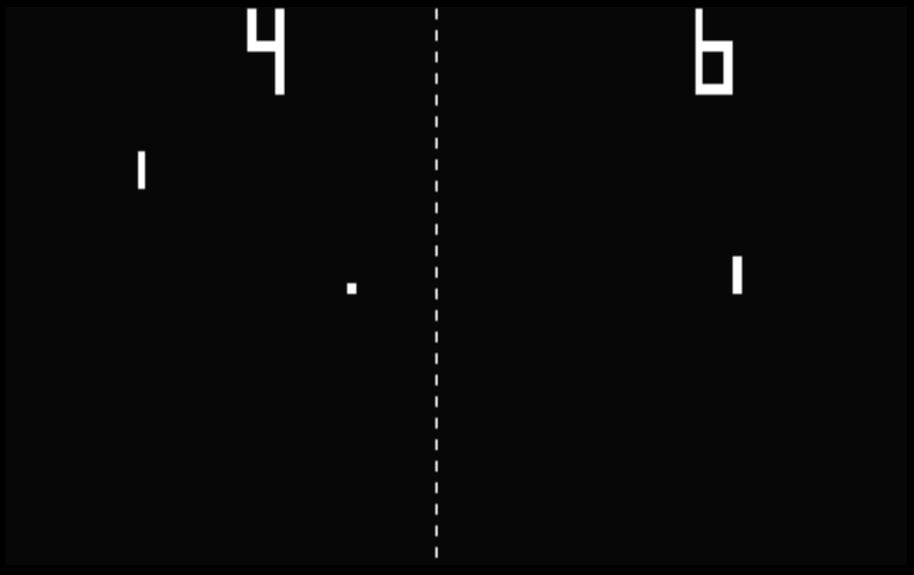
DEEP BLUE AI

Artdink has revealed that *Aquanaut's Holiday* is the latest game in its Game Log series (the first was *Tail Of The Sun*) and it will be due out later this year. Before you get too excited it's worth pointing out that not only will it not feature an English localisation, (despite a Western release on the PlayStation) but that it will use Generative AI to upscale the game's cutscenes.

CAPCOM GETS NOSTALGIC

Capcom recently released several of its classic games on Steam. After appearing on GOG, *Resident Evil 1-3* and *Breath Of Fire IV* are all available on Valve's popular online store. Priced at £7.99 each, they include numerous quality-of-life features, but do include DRM, which means they're currently very hard to get working on Valve's popular Steam Deck.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine



Ping pong ding dong

I often use this column as a confessional. I'm not religious so the option of going and sitting in a small box isn't open to me. I also don't have any friends, so YOU, dear **RG** reader, get the brunt of my mental dumps. This month I have to let go of a secret I've carried with me since I was about five years old. It's something that may mean handing over my retro-gaming membership card, but I am prepared to take that risk. Please believe me – I'm not trying to be some edgelord, I'm baring my soul to you all.

I hate *Pong*. I've always hated *Pong*. From the first time I vaguely remember seeing it, possibly in an arcade but more than likely on my Binatone, I've thought it was dull, badly designed and not worth playing. If I were stuck in a room with a cereal box or *Pong*, I'd spend the time reading and learning all of the small print on the box. The *Big P* wouldn't get a look in.

What makes it worse is that I even went to the creator's house. Al Alcorn was very kind to me, got me fresh homemade lemonade and showed me his OG cab in his garage. I fawned over it, I oohed and aahed, but those noises of affection were empty. It was like I was looking at an ugly baby but felt I couldn't call it out as the parents were so proud. Do parents of ugly babies know they're unattractive? A question for another day and my column in *Baby Monthly*. Poor Al. If you're reading this brother, please forgive me. (Googles to make sure he's still alive… phew, he is!)

It's not the black and whiteness of it. For example – *Sprint 2* is a wonderful thing to play. No, it's more the insipid gameplay, the inability to really get a score going and the straightness of the lines. The last one may be a weird one, but I always found the lines a little… scary? Yeah, that looks stranger on paper than it sounds in my ADHD head. Where's the fun? Sure, it's hugely important historically. But so is the agricultural revolution, and I don't see anyone playing games based around that!

Be honest – you agree with me, don't you? Who has ever played more than 45 seconds of *Pong* or any of its variations? If five-year-old me in 1978 could see it was a dud, you must be able to see it now? I can't be alone in this. I suspect some of you will be pretending to be angry with my supposed heresy but try and be honest with yourself. You don't like it. You never did.

Luckily, I don't have the space here to drop myself further in the proverbial, otherwise I think it would be pitchforks at dawn. [I'm pretty sure I can hear them being sharpened now – Ed] I know there's only so far I can push you, so I'll leave my disdain for *Space Invaders* for another day. *

> "I hate Pong. I've always hated Pong"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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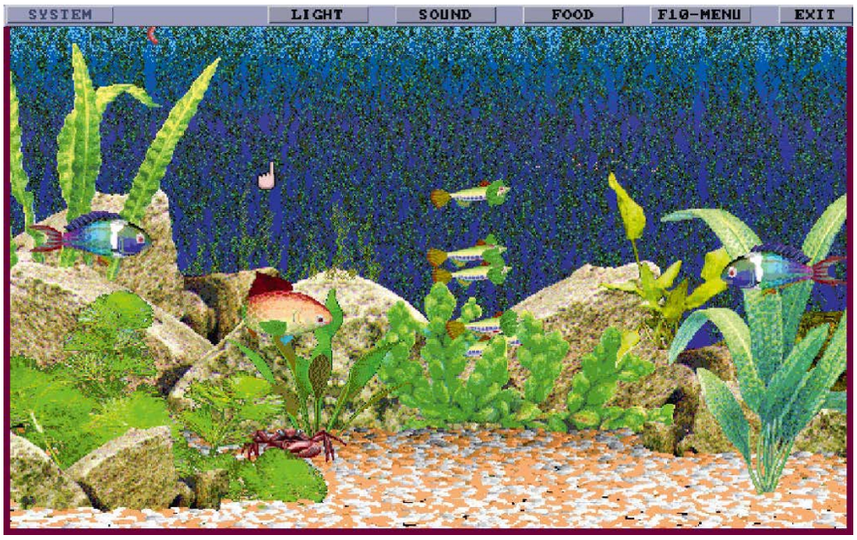
Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.



The Tetris conundrum

Many, many years ago, when I was a full-time games journalist, I had the opportunity to interview Alexey Pajitnov. It was at some games show in London – these were usually three-day-long events, and all the major games companies would be there. Some would construct elaborate booths – I remember one for *Quake*, which was basically an entire gothic castle – and we'd have a schedule of interviews and appointments spanning the whole few days. It was great, because it would give us *Digitiser* content for weeks.

And on this occasion, I was very excited to get to meet the legendary creator of *Tetris* and assorted derivatives thereof (*Welltris* – *Tetris*, but in 3D; *Wordtris* – *Tetris*, but with words; *Hatris* – *Tetris*, but with hats; and the oddly-titled Faces… tris III).

I'd pulled together a long list of things to ask, but right before I was funnelled in to meet the Russian icon, I was told strictly that I couldn't ask him about *Tetris*. You see, *Tetris* was owned by a different company, and Pajitnov was there to promote his new title, *El-Fish*. No *Tetris* talk. They made that very clear.

El-Fish, which you will be forgiven for not remembering, was a fish tank simulator. Users could create their own aquarium – selecting plants, ornaments and backdrops – and then use selective breeding to create their own genetically distinct fish.

It wasn't a puzzle game like *Tetris*. In fact, it wasn't even a game at all, and unless you were really into aquariums it was extremely boring. I know, because I had to review it.

It was probably the most difficult interview I've ever conducted, apart from one a couple of years ago where the interviewee covered every single question I'd prepared in his first, long-winded, answer.

So not only was I banned from mentioning the thing that Alexey Pajitnov – to this day – is most known for, but he seemed very shy, and his English wasn't very good. And on top of that… he was promoting a bloody aquarium simulator, which may have been doing interesting stuff under the hood, but didn't really do much other than simulate an aquarium.

Can you imagine being given the chance to interview, I dunno, Leonard Nimoy, and not being allowed to mention *Star Trek*? What's worse is that I'd been given a half-hour slot for the interview. Thirty minutes in the company of the man who created *Tetris*, and I wasn't allowed to ask him about *Tetris* – a game I'd been hooked on just a couple of years previously! "So, er, do you… do you like fish…?"

Anyway, dull as it might've been, *El-Fish* was, in its own way, sort of clever. It was an early virtual pet, given you could feed the simulated fish, but it's safe to say it didn't have much impact. Perhaps Pajitnov could sense the prevailing winds, which would account for his apparent lack of enthusiasm in selling it to me. Or maybe that was just a consequence of the language barrier.

At least *El-Fish* just slipped away quietly, and didn't diminish Pajitnov's contribution to gaming history.

Such was the seismic impact of *Tetris* that he remains a legend of games design – even if it was a case of catching lightning in a bottle. ✱

> "I was very excited to get to meet the legendary creator of Tetris"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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» The new Nexus is fully compatible with all existing Evercade cartridges.

» Blaze CEO Andrew Byatt still has big plans for the Evercade brand outside of the release of the incoming Nexus.

Evercade Nexus

Blaze Entertainment CEO Andrew Byatt on its latest console

Words by Darran Jones

When Blaze Entertainment teased the Evercade Nexus, all sorts of wide speculation began to emerge. We now know that the Nexus is the latest iteration of Blaze's popular handheld so we spoke to CEO Andrew Byatt to find out more.

So Andrew, is another piece of hardware what the Evercade brand needs right now?
We've been listening to our customers for the past six years since the original handheld launched, and a few things have come up consistently. A larger screen that's still compact enough to travel with, wireless audio and, more recently, analogue control have all been requested by fans. The EXP, which debuted in 2022, addressed a number of fan requests and, with revisions, remains a device that players really value. The Evercade Nexus is the next step in that journey, bringing those ideas together into a more refined, premium handheld experience.

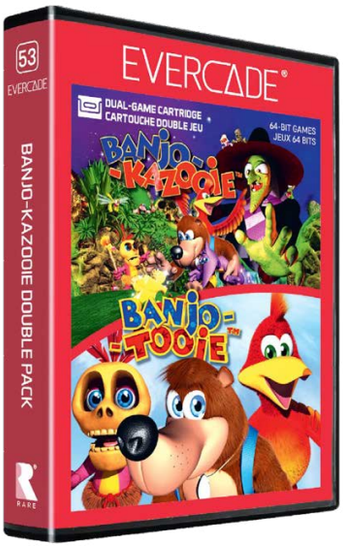
Why use the name Nexus?
We see this as the central focal point of our range and a premium handheld that connects everything together. It is also a device that connects others. And yes, we thought it sounded cool too!

The analogue controls do seem to be going down well. Were they tricky to implement?
We have been working on implementing analogue controls for a while and our new wireless controller has this function. This gives the best possible way to play newer titles like *Banjo-Kazooie* that are arriving on the system in 2026.

The Nexus is arguably the most stylish-looking device you've made. Is this intentional?
With the Evercade Nexus, we wanted to bring a more premium feel to the Evercade brand. This created something that sits comfortably in the modern day while still carrying the DNA of the original design. It's designed to feel like a handheld people are proud to own and show off, and not be out of place for retro gamers, Evercade fans or new people discovering retro games and physical collecting.

You must be pleased with how quickly the Limited Edition Nexus sold out. Is it a new record?
It did go very fast! It was a delight to see the passion of our fans

» [PC] We know that *Doom* is heading to the Evercade later this year, but we'd imagine it will be the PlayStation version. We'd also love to see *Doom 64*.



» It's nice to see that two of Rare's best N64 games are arriving for the Nexus' launch.

» The Limited Edition variant of the Nexus sold out on the day preorders went up.

» See just how big the Nexus is compared to other handhelds.

react as quickly as they did, which underlines the demand from the Evercade community, but also shows the impact we've been able to have over the last six years in engaging new audiences to look at our platform. We expect the Evercade Nexus to reach more people than ever, including those with fond memories of 32-bit and 64-bit games and an interest in our entire line of backwards-compatible cartridges. Whether or not they preordered the Evercade Nexus or the 64 Edition, it's a delight to have everyone on board.

Will you be changing your approach to supporting old hardware going forward, because making sure all cartridges play on all systems feels like it's holding the Nexus back. It felt like this was a really good opportunity to introduce a system that could play more powerful games.

That's a fair point, and it's something we think about a lot. And maybe in the future there will be a new system that plays the next generation of games, but we will always try to make sure people's collections work as we move forward in technology. Backwards compatibility has always been a core part of Evercade. Respecting the collections people have already built and making sure those games continue to have value across new hardware. But we aren't done yet with where we currently are. There's still a huge catalogue of games from the Eighties and Nineties to bring to the platform, and having multiple devices that support the same cartridges helps grow that audience, and puts us in a stronger position to work with bigger licensors and bring more titles to the Evercade.

There's a lot more competition on the market nowadays compared to when you first started, is it getting easier or harder to secure new licences?

It is getting easier to secure licences as we have become a trusted brand with a great track record. The likes of SNK with Neo Geo, Taito, Activision and Rare have all been added to our range of cartridges, with more great names to follow.

A lot of legacy carts are now rising in price, is there any chance of bringing any of them back and would they retain the same cart number as before?

Watch this space!

Can you give us any indication of what other cartridges we can expect for the rest of 2026?

It's always fun to see the community try and guess at what we're doing and what releases are coming. It's even more fun to say that there are always correct guesses out there as well. As for 2026? There are some really good ones coming. Hellishly good ones in fact. ✱

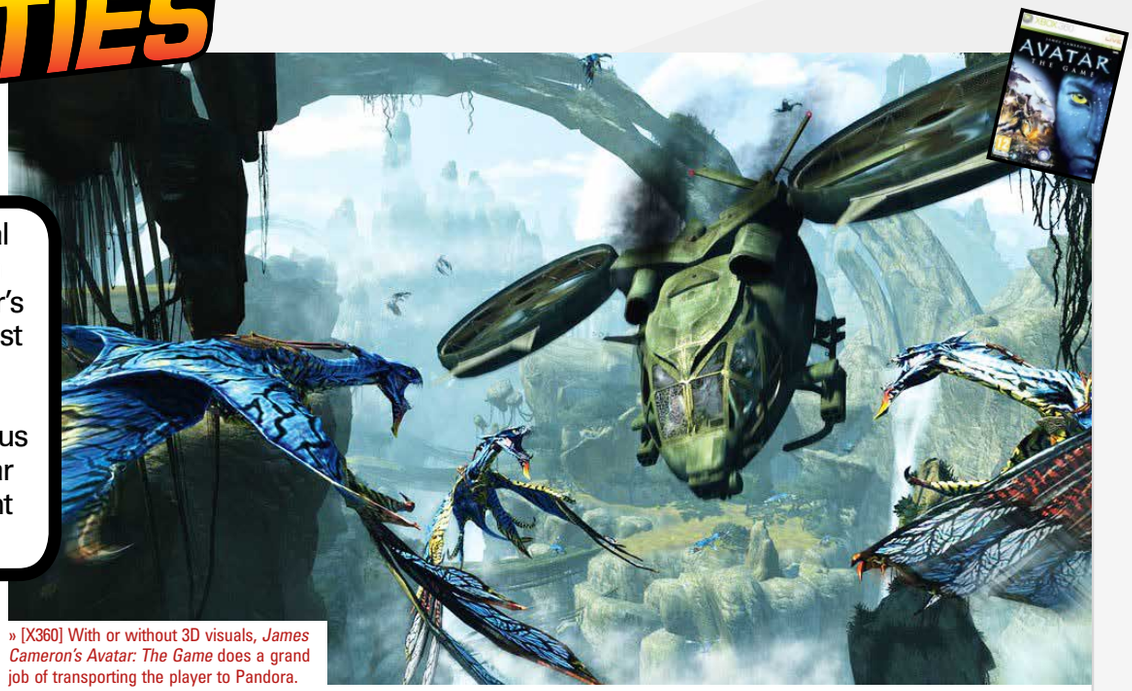
> "Maybe in the future there will be a new system that plays the next generation of games"
>
> **ANDREW BYATT**

» [Evercade] Blaze is promising that its Nexus will be backwards compatible with all cartridges.

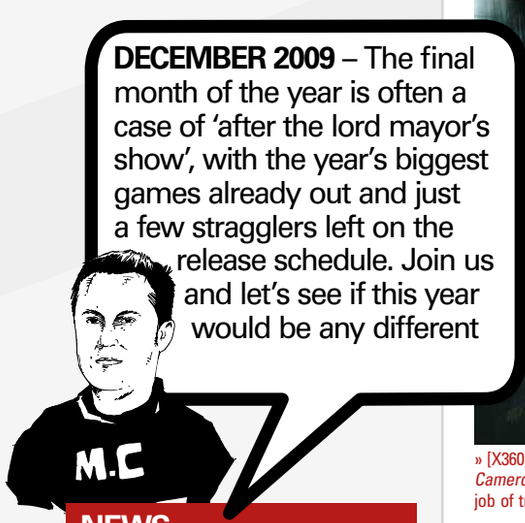
» [Evercade] Neo Geo games from SNK are just some of the big licences Blaze has acquired.

» The Nexus will launch at £169.99 in the UK and will include the *Banjo-Kazooie* cart. The cart is also available to buy separately.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES



» [X360] With or without 3D visuals, *James Cameron's Avatar: The Game* does a grand job of transporting the player to Pandora.



DECEMBER 2009 – The final month of the year is often a case of 'after the lord mayor's show', with the year's biggest games already out and just a few stragglers left on the release schedule. Join us and let's see if this year would be any different

NEWS DECEMBER 2009

It's winter so the weather is dominating the UK news. Severe snowfall affected many parts of the UK in the week before Christmas, with up to 20cm falling in some places. Pandemonium ensued, naturally, with properties left without power, flights in and out of airports cancelled and stranded drivers spending the night in their vehicles. On the upside, thousands of kids got to stay home and start their Christmas holidays early.

In international news, US student Amanda Knox and her former Italian boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito were both found guilty of the murder of British student Meredith Kercher. The trial, which began in January, ended with Knox and Sollecito jailed for 26 and 25 years respectively.

The annual battle for the coveted Christmas number-one single took an unexpected turn when, for the first time in four years, it wasn't won by an *X-Factor* winner. Thanks to a social media 'spoiler' campaign, Joe McElderry's *The Climb* was batted into second place by Rage Against The Machine's 1992 tirade *Killing In The Name*. Poor Joe had never even heard of the song before, telling the BBC that he was "not a rocker kind of guy".

THE LATEST NEWS FROM DECEMBER 2009

The entertainment world was dominated by the movie *Avatar* this month. In the lead up to its release, sceptics were rubbing their hands together, predicting that director James Cameron had spent four years and $237 million crafting an epic cinematic disaster featuring a cast of elongated, blue-skinned aliens. Of course, they were wrong and the film would go on to become the highest-grossing film of all time, an achievement it still holds.

Cameron worked with Ubisoft to produce a tie-in videogame that was released on 4 December. Like the film, it used stereoscopic 3D to make the visuals pop. The problem was: the 3D effect was only available to a small subset of gamers who had access to the required display hardware. Everyone else had to make do with a routine action adventure that didn't exactly wow the critics. If the game had received a movie-style poster featuring single-word review quotes, it would have looked something like this: *games™*, 6/10, "COMPETENT"; *Edge*, 5/10, "WORKMANLIKE"; *Official Xbox Magazine*, 6/10, "AWKWARD"; *Play*, 66%, "BOG-STANDARD". As licensed fare goes, it wasn't too bad. Certainly, we would rather be playing *James Cameron's Avatar: The Game* than that other late 2009 tie-in, *James Patterson Women's Murder Club: Games Of Passion*.

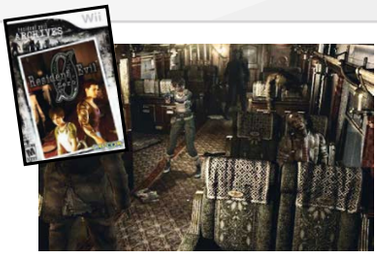
» [Wii] Harry Mason is back in Silent Hill, with little more than a flashlight to protect himself.

Following last month's release of *New Super Mario Bros Wii*, Nintendo followed up with a new entry in *The Legend Of Zelda* series for the DS. *Spirit Tracks* built on the previous handheld entry from 2007, *Phantom Hourglass*, once again utilising stylus-based controls to excellent effect. Despite the twist of being able to navigate Hyrule by train, most critics felt it was a little too similar to its predecessor. Still, it reviewed strongly in the Nintendo magazines. The *Official Nintendo Magazine* awarded it 91%, saying, "Not a huge leap forward for the series but a wonderful game nonetheless." *NGamer* gave it 92%, calling it, "A first class ticket all the way." It received 8/10 from both *Edge* and *games™*.

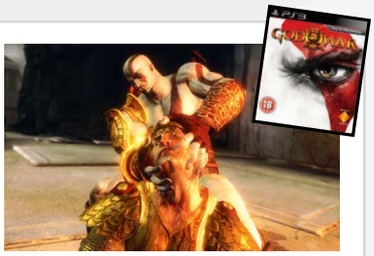
Debuting on the Wii this month was *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, the second of two

Silent Hill titles developed by UK studio Climax. This novel new entry was a reimagining of the original 1999 game, with protagonist Harry Mason once again searching the fog-enshrouded streets for his lost daughter – only now, series convention was side-stepped by removing combat entirely, shifting the focus to exploration and puzzle-solving. The Wii-mote was put to excellent use, doubling as both a flashlight and a mobile phone through which messages were relayed. *NGamer* scored it 83% and called it "The most psychological *Silent Hill* yet". The *Official Nintendo Magazine* was critical of the game's short (six-hour) length, but was otherwise impressed, "One of the most original, well-designed and detailed games we've ever played on the Wii," it concluded in its 86% review.

Continuing with the horror theme, December also saw the Western debut of the 'Archives' release of Capcom's *Resident Evil Zero*. This Wii port of the 2002 GameCube original added support for Wii motion controls and little else.



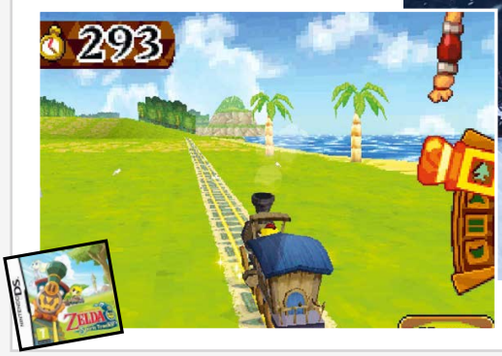
» [Wii] The *Resident Evil* prequel gained some new motion controller options when it was ported to Nintendo's Wii.



» [PlayStation 3] Kratos gets to grips with the competition in *God Of War III*, which would arrive in March 2010.

Over the past months we've mentioned the popularity of mobile games, and on 11 December one of the defining titles took flight. Yes, it was Rovio's *Angry Birds*, the touch-screen phenomenon that helped take mobile gaming into the mainstream. The title would become the top-selling app for much of the following year, clocking up 50 million downloads inside 12 months. Sequels, spin-offs, toys and even some movies would soon follow.

The year (and decade) in gaming drew to a close with the annual Video Game Awards show taking place in Los Angeles. The big winner was *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, which took home a trio of awards: Game Of The Year, Best PS3 Game and Best Graphics. The other winners in the format categories were *Left 4 Dead 2* (Xbox 360), *New Super Mario Bros Wii* (Wii), *Dragon Age: Origins* (PC), and *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* (Handheld). Looking ahead, the award for Most Anticipated Game Of 2010 went to *God Of War III*. The demand for sequels continued with the show offering exclusive glimpses of *Batman: Arkham City*, *Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands*, *Halo: Reach* and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II* – games we could all look forward to in the new decade. ✱



» [DS] Link lets the Spirit Train take the strain in his second DS outing, the entertaining *Spirit Tracks*.

» [PlayStation 3] Naughty Dog's *Uncharted* sequel won several top awards at the 2009 Video Game Awards.

CHARTS

DECEMBER 2009

XBOX 360

1 – **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** (Activision)
2 – **FIFA 10** (EA)
3 – **Assassin's Creed II** (Ubisoft)
4 – **Forza Motorsport 3** (Microsoft)
5 – **Left 4 Dead 2** (Valve)

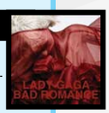
PLAYSTATION 3

1 – **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** (Activision)
2 – **Assassin's Creed II** (Ubisoft)
3 – **FIFA 10** (EA)
4 – **Uncharted 2: Among Thieves** (Sony)
5 – **Need For Speed: Shift** (EA)

WII

1 – **Wii Sports Resort** (Nintendo)
2 – **New Super Mario Bros Wii** (Nintendo)
3 – **Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Winter Games** (Sega)
4 – **Mario Kart Wii** (Nintendo)
5 – **F1 2009** (Codemasters)

MUSIC



1 – **Bad Romance** (Lady Gaga)
2 – **BBC Children In Need Medley** (Peter Kay's Animated All Star Band)
3 – **Russian Roulette** (Rihanna)
4 – **Meet Me Halfway** (Black Eyed Peas)
5 – **Tik Tok** (Kesha)

THIS MONTH IN...

Official Xbox Magazine

"2009 has been another year of sequels," comments Jon Hicks. "Look back and you'll be hard-pressed to find a game that doesn't end in a number." It shows a lack of risk-taking, yes, but he argues it often results in better, more refined games.

GamesMaster

"System rivalries aren't new. In fact, they used to be more brutal…" In a PlayStation 3 vs Xbox 360 vs Wii hardware feature, the mag references the home-computer wars of the Eighties, when ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 owners turned playgrounds into battlegrounds.

NGamer

As Nintendo unveils its new WiiWare and DSiWare line-up, *NGamer* is fondly reminded of bygone development eras. "Wares belong to the little man – designers, programmers, artists and publicists rolled into one. This is a snapshot of how things used to be."

Lunar Jetman

LOVE IT TO THE MOON AND BACK?

» RETROREVIVAL

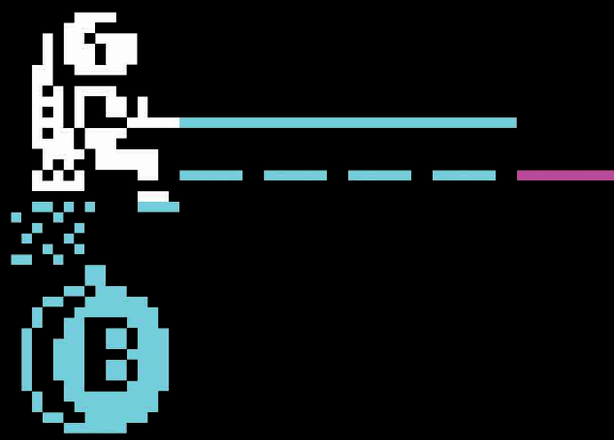
» ZX SPECTRUM » 1983 » ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

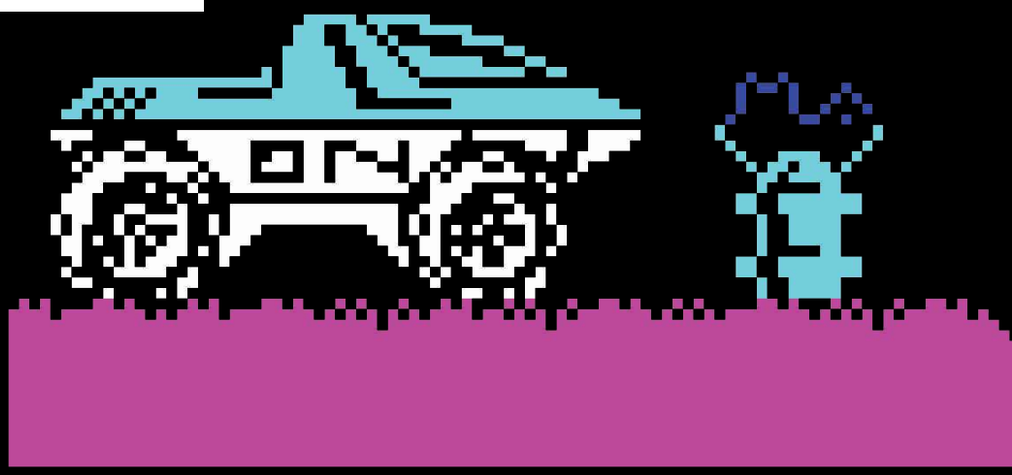
The first computer I owned was a ZX Spectrum, a hand-me-down from my older brother who gave it up when he left home. Eight-year-old me had my very own games machine and it was amazing. There was only one issue – it was the 16KB model, and I quickly realised that many games would only run on the bigger 48KB machine. Still, I probably had 15 or so games, including Ultimate's first four titles, which for me were easily the best 16KB games available (sorry, *Horace* fans). *Jetpac*, in particular, was my favourite, so when I eventually persuaded my parents to get me a 48KB machine a couple of years later, this 48KB-only sequel to *Jetpac* was at the top of my wanted list.

I remember waiting for it to load, and wondering why it was taking so long, then realising it was because the computer's vast memory reserve was being flooded with Ultimate's secret sauce. Then the game started – and there were almost tears.

Jetpac offered instant thrills, as you fuelled up your rocket and blasted the baddies, but the sequel lacked that immediate appeal. Just trying to explain how you play the game in a couple of sentences is a task. You basically have to destroy alien missile bases with bombs that you transport using your (very cool-looking) moon rover. The problem is: the moon's surface is pockmarked with craters, so like a modern-day council road worker, you have to keep stopping and filling in the potholes. And while outside of the vehicle, you're vulnerable to the aliens who whiz around the screen, handing out one-hit kills. Add in teleporters, guided missiles, finite fuel and finite time, and the end result is an exercise in frustration. I think the biggest issue is that the game can't be played with a joystick alone, like *Jetpac*, so you have to remember a bunch of keys too.

With the moon buggy and the scrolling lunar landscape, there's the basis here for an excellent clone of Irem's *Moon Patrol*, but Ultimate wasn't in the habit of copying others. *Lunar Jetman* is a clever game, and it does have its fans, but for me back then, it wasn't the 48KB Ultimate masterwork I expected. For that, I only had to look at its next game, *Atic Atac*... ✱





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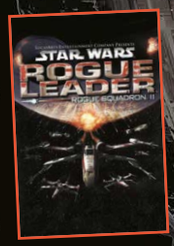
THE MAKING OF STAR WARS ROGUE LEADER

ROGUE SQUADRON II

ARGUABLY THE MOST ANTICIPATED GAMECUBE LAUNCH TITLE, ROGUE SQUADRON II COMBINED MISSIONS FROM THE ORIGINAL STAR WARS MOVIES WITH STAGES BASED ON EVENTS BETWEEN THE SCENES. THE SEQUEL'S DIRECTOR JULIAN EGGEBRECHT EXPLAINS HOW IT ALL CAME TOGETHER

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» Julian Eggebrecht produced *Rogue Squadron* and directed its sequels *Rogue Leader* and *Rebel Strike*.



Rogue Leader cover art created using modder General_Han_Solo's excellent HD textures mod.

IN THE KNOW

- » **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- » **DEVELOPER:** FACTOR 5
- » **PLATFORM:** GAMECUBE
- » **RELEASED:** 2001
- » **GENRE:** FLIGHT COMBAT

For many growing up in the Eighties, arcades were the stuff of dreams. However, in Germany they were restricted to adults, so when future Factor 5 cofounder Julian Eggebrecht visited Bexhill-On-Sea as an exchange student he poured his time and money into the seaside town's numerous coin-ops. Atari's adaptation of the original *Star Wars* movie soon became a firm favourite, and many years later when he was discussing projects with LucasArts Games he suggested a similar approach that upped the ante. What Julian envisaged was an arcade flight combat title that was based on the original *Star Wars* trilogy. His publisher had other ideas, but proving himself with the *Star Wars* title that it preferred ultimately led to him doing what he really wanted with its sequel *Rogue Squadron II*.

"The original idea was to recreate the battles from the movies and then fill in the story in-between," Julian recalls. "We approached Lucasfilm with that design, and it said no. It said its plan was to stay away from the movies, and that we should look at the comic books. So we derived most of the original *Rogue Squadron* from those. It was very successful, which meant that I could go back to Lucasfilm and say that we wanted to work on a sequel, but that this time we would love to do what we originally had in mind. The only person I really told the plan to was the president of LucasArts at the time Simon Jeffery. I also told him that we would be one of the first developers to have access to the GameCube, so we could do a demo for its unveiling. He said sure, but the deal was that nobody else inside LucasArts could know about it."

» [GameCube] The first mission in *Rogue Squadron II* eases you into the action by getting you to take out towers.

> "IT WAS A CRAZY 19-DAY SPRINT! THEN WHEN WE ARRIVED IN JAPAN WE WERE TOLD THAT WE WERE THE ONLY ONES WHO HAD A PLAYABLE DEMO"
>
> **JULIAN EGGEBRECHT**

As Factor 5 had been helping Nintendo to design the GameCube's chipset, the studio could leverage its unique position to get a head start on designing *Rogue Squadron II* for the still-in-development system. It put all its efforts into getting a playable demo ready for the console's big reveal, an achievement that not even Nintendo managed to match. "I believe the unveiling was in August 2000 at Space World at Makuhari Messe in Tokyo," Julian notes. "ArtX had the first 'tape out' 19 days before that, which was essentially the first prototype chip of what would become the GameCube. So my partner Thomas Engel and myself thought that if we drove down there it could give us one of the earliest kits. ArtX said sure, so we started working on it immediately. We had the art prepared and ▶

» [GameCube] It's never a good sign when you have to fly through floating ship debris in order to join a battle.

» [GameCube] The Battle Of Hoth from *The Empire Strikes Back* is an epic multi-stage mission that you can play in the game.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TURRICAN
PLATFORM: C64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1990

STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT II (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION, PC
RELEASED: 1995

STAR WARS: ROGUE SQUADRON
PLATFORM: N64, PC
RELEASED: 1998

» [GameCube] It isn't the fastest of ships, but the Y-wing's shields give it some protection from asteroids.

BONUS CONTENT

THE ROGUE SQUADRON II UNLOCKABLES YOU SHOULD AIM FOR

SECRET MISSIONS

■ You pick off TIE fighters in the Millennium Falcon and then shake off more of them in an asteroid field in the first and second bonus levels. The third is the previously mentioned Vader Death Star stage, and in the last you're Vader again on a mission to take down rebel transporters.

HIDDEN SHIPS

■ As well as the nippy Naboo starfighter, you get to fly in a TIE fighter and Boba Fett's Slave 1, which although poorly shielded, has cluster missiles. The TIE Advanced has these too, plus durability and agility. Then there's the Buick Convertible, which is really just there for laughs.

COOL CODES

■ There's a wealth of codes that can be typed in at the options menu to enable cheats and fun features. Besides unlocking missions, ships and weapons, you can bring up credits, concept art and a documentary. You can even play the game in black and white, and unlock the infamous Ace Mode.

ACE MODE

■ With Ace Mode enabled, *Rogue Squadron II*'s missions become near impossible. There aren't additional objectives to undertake, but achieving the standard goals requires the best armed and fastest ships due to the ferocity and sheer number of enemies that home in on you all guns blazing.

» [GameCube] Enemies attack from all sides in Factor 5's game, which leads to some chaotic firefights.

» [GameCube] *Rogue Squadron II* takes you to tense battles on planets throughout the *Star Wars* universe.

▶ everything; the X-wing and essentially the surface of the Death Star, and we had already done the intro cutscene. It was a crazy 19-day sprint! Then when we arrived in Japan we were told that we were the only ones who had a playable demo. You could fly over the Death Star and shoot down TIE fighters, then we had the real-time fly-by cutscene. So that was the starting point."

The excitement generated by Factor 5's demo made it an obvious candidate to be a launch title for the forthcoming GameCube. However, there was some fallout from the secrecy surrounding its development that got compounded by reactions to the new *Star Wars* movie. "Because the demo was so well received, the actual game was given a green light within a week or so. Then we were on the way," Julian enthuses. "Everybody at LucasArts was completely in shock, because they hadn't known about it – including the marketing department! Politically it was tricky, because *Starfighter* was supposed to be the big flight game for that year. But at the end of the day it was completely overshadowed by *Rogue Squadron II*. Certainly that wasn't our intent, because it was on a different platform. But the problem was also the relatively intense backlash that was happening at the time because lots of people really didn't like *Star Wars: Episode I*. So there was *Starfighter* out there, and then of course we suddenly said we were going back to the original trilogy one more time, so many fans thought *Rogue Squadron II* was *it*. So politically it was a bad situation."

More pressing than politics was the tight deadline imposed on *Rogue Squadron II* due to the GameCube launching just 15 months later. However, Factor 5's game had to be previewed six months earlier than that and there were other complications. "We were looking at a timeframe where we pretty much had to have done a presentable version of everything by E3 in May," Julian recalls. "There weren't any additional dev kits to be had, plus we had to finish *Battle For Naboo* and *Indiana Jones And The Infernal Machine*. So we started working on *Rogue Squadron II* that September, but we worked on it pretty much on the side, because the main teams were really still working on the N64 games. Then I believe right after Christmas in early 2001 we really cranked up and said we needed to focus 100% on *Rogue Squadron II* so that we could make it for the launch of the GameCube. So all together we really only had about nine months of development time for the whole game."

> "ROGUE SQUADRON II WAS REALLY ABOUT HOW WE COULD STICK AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE MOVIES AND WHO WE COULD FEATURE"
>
> **JULIAN EGGEBRECHT**

Although time was tight, basing *Rogue Squadron II* on the original *Star Wars* trilogy gifted Factor 5 with epic cinematic battles that it could adapt as missions for its game. For the remaining stages, the studio had to dig

STAND-OUT STAGES

NOTEWORTHY LEVELS FROM THE ROGUE SQUADRON SEQUEL

DEATH STAR ATTACK

■ Based on the first *Star Wars* movie's famous finale, *Rogue Squadron II*'s first mission takes place above the Death Star. After using communications towers for target practice there's a dogfight with TIE fighters, and if you win there's an intense adaptation of the trench run sequence.

ISON CORRIDOR AMBUSH

■ When TIE fighters and TIE interceptors attack a convoy of frigates it's up to you to fend them off. Midway through the battle you can swap the X-wing for the speedy and highly manoeuvrable A-wing, and you'll need it when the convoy travels though a gas nebula with limited visibility.

BATTLE OF HOTH

■ Arguably the best sequence in *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Rogue Squadron II* puts you in the middle of the epic battle. There are AT-STs to blast, an Imperial shuttle to disable and of course AT-ATs to bring down with towropes. Finally, you have to keep transporters safe from TIE fighters.

much deeper into the films. "We first looked at all of the breadcrumbs that the movies could give us," Julian explains. "So not only full sequences but also if there was any mention of anything inside the movies, then we said, 'OK, why don't we do that?' Then we wanted to have certain locales, like Bespin, but the movies obviously don't have a dogfighting scene on Bespin. For free mags check sastatus.com So we came up with something where there was a raid by the rebellion on Bespin to steal fuel and stuff like that. The story in the movies is pretty tight, especially between *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*, so we could make out what probably happened in-between them relatively easily. *Rogue Squadron II* was really about how we could stick as close as possible to the movies and who we could feature. We really wanted the main characters from the movies, so that it felt like you were those heroes."

» [GameCube] Missions where you protect vulnerable rebel ships are a staple in *Rogue Squadron II*.

There was also the opportunity to play as the original *Star Wars* films' villain thanks to two bonus missions that Factor 5 created for *Rogue Squadron II*. The studio then complemented these with levels where players took charge of the Millennium Falcon. "The Imperial stuff was obvious," Julian observes. "I mean, you always have a little bit of wanting to be the bad guy! So that was the thought behind the Imperial levels. Out of the other levels, one of my favourites was a shooting gallery. The Falcon gunner level while you're flying from the Death Star is super simple, you're just sitting there, but it's a hell of a lot of fun to do the whole thing. It was a sequence

RAZOR RENDEZVOUS

■ Something of a shooting gallery in so much as you're blasting stationary targets, more specifically the cannons, shield generators and the command deck of a massive Star Destroyer. It sounds simple, and it would be if it wasn't heavily defended by TIE fighters and armed to the teeth!

TRIUMPH OF THE EMPIRE

■ In an unexpected twist, this fun bonus mission allows you to play as Darth Vader in the final battle from the original *Star Wars* film. After dispatching Y-wings that are attacking the Death Star, you're challenged with stopping Luke from blowing up the Empire's world-destroying weapon.

BATTLE OF ENDOR

■ One of the toughest missions in the game throws dozens of TIE fighters and interceptors at you before tasking you with defending a frigate from TIE bombers. If you survive you have to take down two Star Destroyers in the same way that you did in Razor Rendezvous while under heavy fire.

ROGUE SERIES

MORE ROGUE TITLES, THEIR INSPIRATION AND A SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

STAR WARS: SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

■ The main inspiration for *Rogue Squadron*, *Shadows Of The Empire* laid the foundations for Factor 5's successful series. It impresses more with its third-person flight combat than its on-foot challenges, with battles on Hoth, in deep space and on speeder bikes being particular highlights.

STAR WARS: ROGUE SQUADRON

■ An arcade flight combat game rather than a space combat simulation, *Rogue Squadron* makes you feel like an X-wing pilot without enduring a steep learning curve. Its sequential mission-based stages are made more immersive by cutscenes inspired by the comics that give the game its name.

STAR WARS EPISODE I: BATTLE FOR NABOO

■ Developed by Factor 5 using the tech behind *Rogue Squadron*, *Battle For Naboo* differentiates itself with levels inspired by *The Phantom Menace* movie. Although distinct in terms of story, Naboo is every bit a spiritual successor to *Rogue Squadron* in terms of its structure and gameplay.

STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON III: REBEL STRIKE

■ The other half of *Rogue Squadron II* in terms of much of its content, *Rebel Strike* boasts the co-op multiplayer mode that Factor 5 didn't have time to develop for its predecessor. It also includes missions that were cut from *Rogue Leader*, like taking out the shield generator on Endor.

» [GameCube] Stealth rather than firepower is required to sneak past and deactivate sensors in this mission.

» [GameCube] The A-wing may not be much to look at, but it impresses with its speed and manoeuvrability.

» [GameCube] *Rogue Squadron II* is at its best when there's a screen full of ships in play and the ammo is flying.

▶ from the movie that I always wanted to play because I remembered it so much just from the music and everything from the movie. Flying the Falcon was also something that was just fun because it has this unusual set-up in terms of controls. A lot of the stuff that we did was to really differentiate between the different weapon and control types that the different craft had. I mean, a lot of the gameplay and design came from that really."

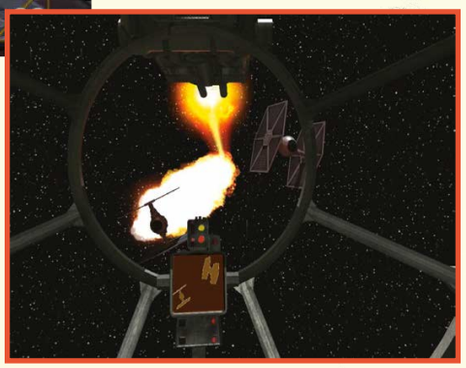
Additional gameplay came from *Rogue Squadron II* being so thoroughly tested. More specifically, the *Star Wars* flight combat title was given an Ace Mode option that greatly increased the threat posed by the enemies in its missions. "We had Platinum Medals in *Rogue Squadron*, and then of course we had the Ace Medals in *Rogue Leader*," Julian point out. "It was mostly driven by QA, because our QA folks were maniacs! I mean, they were literally able to play the game with their eyes closed. They were absolutely perfect at it, especially the early levels. The stages that came together towards the end probably got a little bit less playtime, but the early levels were short levels, especially if you compare them to huge sprawling open-world games. Everything in *Rogue Leader* was very staged, so you could really perfect every single level and these guys were so good. I think it was towards the last four weeks of the project where we put out the challenge where we told them that we wanted to put in this Ace Mode. So we asked them for the hardest but just about achievable levels where every single requirement for the Ace Medals was possible. So they were right on the edge of impossibility!"

Equally close to impossible was the task of completing *Rogue Squadron II*'s development in time to preview it at the world's largest

» [GameCube] Although it's not the most controllable craft, it's always a thrill to fly the Millennium Falcon.

» [GameCube] The game's TIE fighters can be really dogged once they get you in their sights.

» [GameCube] The Death Star's inner conduits provide a deadly obstacle course in this intense level.



» [GameCube] This *Rogue Squadron II* stage was inspired by one of its director's favourite movie moments.

videogames trade event. Factor 5 managed to pull this off, only to be told the last thing it wanted to hear just one week later. "We showed it for the first time at E3 in 2001," Julian recollects. "We had the whole game tweaked to perfection with all of the levels we had going at the time, and they were running at 60 frames per second. Then I remember Nintendo Technology contacted us the week after E3 and said that it was so sorry but they had to slightly clock down the speed of the GPU. We were like, 'Oh my god!' It was about the worst news because we then relatively quickly received new hardware or a software patch that meant a lower clock speed. When we received the updated GPU of course the game started to stutter; it wasn't running fluidly at 60 frames per second anymore. So that essentially meant that we not only had to finish the game in the remaining time, but we also had to optimise it even further, which we weren't really anticipating. So it was a pretty crazy timeframe."

With time in such short supply, concessions had to be made to Factor 5's initial plans for *Rogue Squadron II*. Not only did missions based on the attack on the Empire's Endor base and the speeder bike scenes get cut, but the game's multiplayer was also scrapped. "We had the Endor forest in the original design, and we wanted to cut back and forth between the Endor battle in space as well as in the forest," Julian comments. "But when the whole nine-month development situation became clear the forest part had to go. We wanted to do speeder bikes too obviously, but there wasn't time. That was also the reason why we didn't do local multiplayer. It would have been awesome playing those levels together, but we didn't have the time for it."

> "A LOT OF THE STUFF THAT WE DID WAS TO REALLY DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT WEAPON AND CONTROL TYPES THAT THE DIFFERENT CRAFT HAD"
>
> **JULIAN EGGEBRECHT**

Omissions aside, *Rogue Squadron II* was finished on schedule, at which point it was released as a GameCube launch title to near universal acclaim. Its timely completion also allowed Julian to collect on a deal. "I had been visiting Nintendo, and I saw it had one of the two or three existing *Sky Skipper* coin-ops there," Julian reveals. "I'm a huge arcade fan, so I asked Ken Lobb, our Nintendo producer, if I could borrow its *Sky Skipper* cabinet for a few weeks if we delivered *Rogue Squadron II* on time. So he came through with that."

On reviewing *Rogue Squadron II* some decades later, Julian offers a balanced assessment of a game that he is clearly very proud of. Despite the time that has passed since he directed it, his words are those of someone that hasn't forgotten a moment of the experience. "I think *Rogue Squadron II* is too hard, but outside of that it's definitely a good game and I fondly remember the development process," Julian reviews. "We were all extremely happy with how the whole thing came out. Out of the levels the trench run is frankly one of the weak spots. My favourites are the battles over the Death Stars and Hoth. I mean, we always wanted to do Hoth right, and it was the first time that Hoth had been done really properly. *Shadows Of The Empire* did the first version, but on the N64 it was a little bit rough for that. But *Rogue Leader*, especially Hoth and Bespin, came out fantastically. My two favourite levels are Hoth and Bespin. So overall it was a great development. It was a great ride." ✱

THE MAKING OF LEGO® STAR WARS™ II

THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** TRAVELLER'S TALES
- **PLATFORM:** PS2, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 2006
- **GENRE:** ACTION

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TOY STORY

PLATFORM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES, PC

RELEASED: 1995

CRASH BANDICOOT: THE WRATH OF CORTEX

PLATFORM: PS2, GAMECUBE, XBOX

RELEASED: 2001

LEGO INDIANA JONES: THE ORIGINAL ADVENTURES (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: PS2, VARIOUS

RELEASED: 2008

AS WELL AS BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF ITS PREDECESSOR, **LEGO STAR WARS II** ALSO TAPPED INTO THE POPULARITY OF THE ORIGINAL MOVIES. DESIGNER JON BURTON EXPLAINS HOW THE HUMOROUS SEQUEL TOOK THE SERIES TO NEW HEIGHTS

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» Traveller's Tales founder Jon Burton directed and designed *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy.*

Sequels can be rather tricky to get right. They have to retain the essence of what made their predecessor popular while at the same time distinguishing themselves enough that they deliver a unique experience. In the case of *Lego Star Wars II*, Traveller's Tales had a somewhat easier journey. The first game had been very successful despite being based on the controversial *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, and it had laid foundations with its gameplay that the studio could build on. The obvious move then was to adapt the much-loved original *Star Wars* trilogy for what was a highly anticipated follow-up, as designer Jon Burton notes. "We were a work-for-hire developer and we became a scrappy little 'virtual publisher,'" Jon reminisces. "We took a big risk on Lego *Star Wars* when everyone else had turned down the publishing rights. To our amazement, and despite [*games™*] giving it a 4/10, *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* sold very well, and with LucasArts on board as the publisher a sequel was inevitable. The first game was based on the prequel trilogy because it was timed to launch with the release of the *Revenge Of The Sith* movie, but the game we really wanted to make was one based on the original trilogy, so that was the logical choice for the sequel."

» [PlayStation 2] The *games™* review Jon mentions was written by Darran. [If it's any consolation, Jon, I thought this was miles better – Ed]

Having decided to base its follow-up on the original *Star Wars* movies, it would be reasonable to expect that a period of deep research on the three films would follow. But in actual fact, the Traveller's Tales team tasked with making *Lego Star Wars II* already had extensive knowledge of the subject matter. The studio had also studied the *Star Wars* franchise as part of preparations for discussions with publisher LucasArts about another project. "I'm old enough to have seen *Star Wars* in the cinema in 1977," Jon points out, "and I'm a huge fan of the series in any case, so I had a good working knowledge of *Star Wars* and that universe, as did many others on our core team. Also, we had already pitched LucasArts a *Star Wars* game using the seamless fractal planet technology that we had developed for *Haven: Call Of The King*. It was kind of like *No Man's Sky* but years earlier, so we were up to speed so to speak."

> "THE FIRST GAME WAS BASED ON THE PREQUEL TRILOGY, BUT THE GAME WE REALLY WANTED TO MAKE WAS ONE BASED ON THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY"
> **JON BURTON**

Of course, no matter how well ▶

IMPROBABLE MISSION

CHALLENGES BASED ON MEMORABLE MOVIE MOMENTS

DEATH STAR ESCAPE

■ Even after R2-D2 saves the heroes from being crushed in a garbage compactor the challenge of getting out remains. There's an unreachable door switch, and of course being a Lego game you have to build a platform so you can reach it.

HOTH BATTLE

■ An epic adaptation of the movie scene with waves of drones, AT-STs and AT-ATs. As well as blowing up barriers by towing rolling bombs into them, you have to perform the same trick with AT-ATs after roping their legs together.

JABBA'S PALACE

■ Breaking into Jabba's lair to rescue Han and the droids is no mean feat. It's full of Jabba's guards, and you need to work out puzzles to progress. Lastly, there's the man-eating Rancor, who you need to crush under a portcullis.

BATTLE OF ENDOR

■ A mission of multiple parts that begins with puzzles, platforming and firefights in the Ewok village. This core gameplay only becomes more intense as you move deeper into the forests of Endor before storming the Empire's base.

» [PlayStation 2] Rescuing R2-D2 from the Jawas involves platforming up the side of their gigantic vehicle.

» [PlayStation 2] The vehicle challenges include intense dogfights where you pilot the Millennium Falcon.

» [PlayStation 2] The non-canon challenges in *Lego Star Wars II* include constructing an AT-ST by using the Force.

» [PlayStation 2] The helmet dispensers found in the game allow you to safely pass Empire forces in disguise.

prepared Traveller's Tales was before making *Lego Star Wars II*, there was still no shortage of ground work to be done before development of the game could begin. Two aspects of the sequel that had to be decided on were which scenes from the three *Star Wars* movies should its levels be based on and which characters should be playable. Thankfully, the structure of the films lent itself to both decisions. "Our format of six levels per movie was kind of based on the natural action beat formula of movies in general," Jon remembers. "Most action movies have three acts, and you usually have action leading up to each of those three acts, so we tended to be able to pull out six levels pretty easily. Because the game could be played as full-time co-op with two players we couldn't have sections where there was only one character present. But luckily, the original *Star Wars* movies tended to team up groups of characters, like Luke and R2, Han and Leia, and so on, so there was very little story we were unable to tell. It was more of a problem in *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* to be honest, for instance when Obi-Wan went off to Geonosis on his own."

This point on the original trilogy focussing on groups of characters is a salient one, and it fed into another challenge Traveller's Tales had while designing *Lego Star Wars II*. How would it accommodate the sprawling casts from the first three films? Jon cites the original game as guiding the decision to have numerous swappable player characters. "It all started with *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* of course, because George Lucas had threaded multiple action sequences together at the end of the prequels," Jon muses. "If you think of *Phantom Menace* at the end you had Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon Jinn fighting Darth Maul; Padmé, R2 and Panaka storming Theed Palace; Anakin attacking the Lucrehulks and Jar Jar Binks fighting the Battle Droids. You've already got seven characters right there. After we had decided to make bad guys playable that unlocked a whole bunch of other 'must plays' such as Maul, Battle Droids, Dooku and Grievous. Because Lego mini-figures are generally a set size we could share a lot of animations and character models, which made multiple characters a little easier

MAKING A SCENE

OUR FAVOURITE CUTSCENES FROM LEGO STAR WARS II

SECRET PLANS

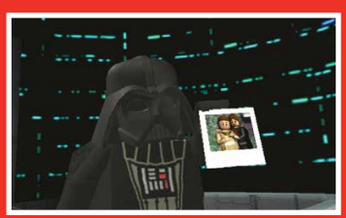
■ When Leia trusts R2-D2 to take secret rebellion plans to Obi-Wan Kenobi she attempts to slot the disk with the plans on into one of the droid's ports. She can't find one, so she lifts up his flip-top head and drops the disk in!

OBI-WAN VS VADER

■ Before Obi-Wan joins with the Force while battling Darth Vader he takes time to give Luke a cheerful wave. Feeling left out, and much to Obi-Wan's disapproval, Vader joins in before shaking his head as he realises his faux pas.

WAMPA WOES

■ After freeing himself from the Wampa's cave using his lightsaber Luke turns his weapon on the beast, cutting its arm off as he does so. The awkward smile on his face as he nervously backs out of the cave is absolutely priceless.



I AM YOUR FATHER

■ Characters in *Lego Star Wars II* don't talk, so how does Vader tell Luke that he's his father? Simple! He pulls out a Polaroid of him with his arm around a pregnant Padmé, pointing first at her bump and then in Luke's direction.

to do. Then once we had set the benchmark in *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* we of course had to beat it in *Lego Star Wars II*!"

After going all in on having a wealth of playable characters in *Lego Star Wars II*, the next consideration was which original trilogy favourites should make the cut and which would be non-player characters, or simply not depicted at all. In part due to convenience, members of the trilogy's cast of characters that fans loved to hate were made playable as well as those that fans loved. In fact, the only characters that you couldn't play as in the follow-up were those with few or no lines in the films and those that were incidental to the narrative. "Obviously the main hero characters were playable," Jon caveats. "Then most of the enemies were playable too, as they were easy to add. That was because the enemy AI system effectively 'drove' them as if they were playable by emulating joypad inputs to move them around. Any non-playable characters tended to be ones that you only saw in cutscenes, or miscellaneous characters such as the Cloud City citizens. Although I can't think of any good reason why you couldn't have played as the Cloud City citizens, for example. Maybe we just wanted to keep the character grid manageable."

Other areas of *Lego Star Wars II*'s design added features not found in its predecessor, and these complemented aspects of the sequel that improved on elements that had been established by the first game. One of the follow-up's more interesting innovations came in the form of customisable characters that the player assembled in a Bacta Tank, body part by body part. You could then play as them in the game's Free Play mode. Thanks to player feedback on *Lego Star Wars*, all player characters except droids could now build things from Lego instead of that skill being restricted to Jedis. Vehicle modes also became more common than in the first game, and these were made free roaming rather than on rails. Vehicles also cropped up more often in on-foot stages, including one that you wouldn't expect to see in a provincial spaceport. "We were looking for new features to add to move the series forwards," Jon says of this greater emphasis on vehicles. "Vehicles are a huge part of *Star Wars* of course, and Lego has an extensive collection of buildable play sets, so they were an obvious choice to add. Adding them certainly opened up more gameplay avenues for things like the Death Star assaults, and having them in levels could add a great sense of scale and empowerment, like the AT-ST in Mos Eisley." ▶

» [PlayStation 2] C-3PO can't jump in the game, so you have to devise ways of getting him to higher ground.

"VEHICLES ARE A HUGE PART OF STAR WARS OF COURSE, AND LEGO HAS AN EXTENSIVE COLLECTION OF BUILDABLE PLAY-SETS, SO THEY WERE AN OBVIOUS CHOICE TO ADD"
JON BURTON

» [PlayStation 2] The trench run from the original *Star Wars* movie is faithfully adapted in *Lego Star Wars II*.

LUKE'S NEW HAND

■ After Luke loses his hand in battle with Darth Vader, a droid fits a mechanical one in its place. The only snag is that it has a mind of its own, and it soon makes a bid for freedom, causing Luke to chase after the escaping appendage.

SARLACC PIT

■ Made to walk the plank, Luke uses it as a diving board and jumps into the sky to distract from his friends throwing him his lightsaber. Finding fun in the situation, Luke carries on jumping, throwing different shapes as he goes.

» [PlayStation 2] Taking out destroyer weapons with the Millennium Falcon never gets old.

USE THE FARCE!

MORE LEGO STAR WARS SATIRE FROM TRAVELLER'S TALES

LEGO STAR WARS: THE VIDEO GAME

■ The template for the Traveller's Tales *Lego* games that followed, *Lego Star Wars* adapts the prequel trilogy of movies. While fighting the Empire you collect Lego studs for points, build things using the Force and fly podracers.

LEGO STAR WARS: THE COMPLETE SAGA

■ Although technically a compilation of the first two games, *The Complete Saga* has a wealth of extras and upgrades. It reinstates scrapped levels and includes redesigned versions of others. It also has an arcade battle arena mode.

LEGO STAR WARS III: THE CLONE WARS

■ Based on the *Clone Wars* movie and TV show, *Lego Star Wars III* introduces new mechanics such as controlling large armies and swapping between scenarios. You can also land your ship in vehicle levels, get out and fight on foot.

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

■ Arguably the ultimate in *Lego Star Wars* games, *Skywalker Saga* adapts the prequel, original and sequel trilogies. Advances from the earlier titles include open-world hubs, non-linear progression, voice acting and combo attacks.

» [PlayStation 2] Unlike in the movies, R2-D2 is capable of platforming in *Lego Star Wars II* by using propulsion jets.

» [PlayStation 2] After training with Yoda, Luke can use the Force to build objects with his mind.

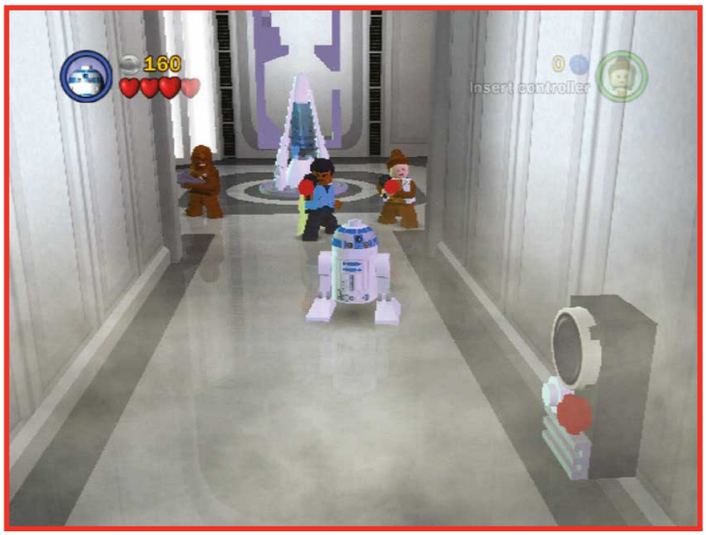
» [PlayStation 2] You team up Luke and Vader against an Emperor's guard before facing his deadly master.

One particular aspect of *Lego Star Wars II* remained unchanged from the original game, and with good reason considering how well it had worked. If anything, the cutscenes in the sequel were more suited to satire than those in the earlier game. Perhaps it was easier to make light of the original trilogy scenes that were being sent up because they were so well known by the sequel's target audience. In any case, the respect for the movies shown by the team working on the game meant that the cutscenes were hilarious in a way that respected the original work. "I think the team's love for the source material was such that we were always going to protect the spirit of it," Jon considers. "One of the things we found very early on was that if we had a Lego character earnestly trying to play its role seriously it just came across as funny. We didn't have to try too hard to add 'gags' as such. Just seeing Luke face Vader in Lego form was just fun and funny full stop."

A big part of what made the cutscenes so funny, and in fact defined them to a great extent, was that the characters didn't talk. Far from detracting from their humour, having mute Lego versions of the *Star Wars* characters act out setpiece scenes using body language, facial expressions and miming actually added to the hilarity. It also placed an emphasis on non-verbal exposition, which the cutscene designers excelled at. "The no-dialogue/mime decision was made for *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*, and it unlocked so much humour it felt obvious to keep it for *Lego Star Wars II*," Jon recalls. "The original decision not to have dialogue was definitely a cost and logistics issue. We were a small team with a small budget, and there was no way we would have the pull and budget to license the voiceovers for use in the game, and using sound-a-likes felt like the wrong way to do it. However, the lack of dialogue meant we had to be creative in how we relayed things such as Vader being Luke's father, in that instance by

» [PlayStation 2] The version of Jabba The Hutt's sail barge in *Lego Star Wars II* provides a lot of platforming fun.

» [PlayStation 2] The speeder bike challenges involve a combination of combat racing and taking out targets.



» [PlayStation 2] The game's push button panels can only be interacted with by R2-D2 or C-3PO.

» [PlayStation 2] Puzzles are a big part of the game, with this one being set by the Emperor himself!

showing him a Polaroid of a pregnant Padmé, and that just ended up making it that much funnier!"

As funny as the cutscenes were and no matter how much humour was added by depicting the *Star Wars* cast as Lego figures in-game, players that wanted to take a serious approach to the gameplay in *Lego Star Wars II* were well catered for. Vast numbers of Lego studs could be collected while you played through the levels, and these could be cashed in at the sequel's hub in exchange for playable characters, drivable vehicles, hints and cheat codes. Secret items such as Minikits, Gold Bricks and Red Bricks could also be sought out. The first of these were assembled from parts, and they formed a vehicle on completion that could be taken out for a spin in a bonus stage. Gold Bricks were awarded for completing levels, and accruing enough of them granted players a reward. Lastly, Red Bricks were limited to one per level, but they unlocked the ability for players to purchase invaluable extras like invincibility and stud multipliers. "People really enjoyed messing around with the extras in the original game, so we wanted to have more of them and make them a more integral part of the sequel," Jon reasons. "We also wanted to add some really well hidden bonuses in levels, so adding a Red Brick to each level to represent extras seemed like a good way to handle that."

> "WE DIDN'T HAVE TO TRY TOO HARD TO ADD 'GAGS' AS SUCH. JUST SEEING LUKE FACE VADER IN LEGO FORM WAS JUST FUN AND FUNNY FULL STOP"
> **JON BURTON**

Looking back at the critical response *Lego Star Wars II* received on its release it seems clear that it ticked a lot of boxes for a lot of reviewers, and by extension this widespread approval was shared by players. Particular praise was reserved for the game's offbeat humour and its focus on the original *Star Wars* trilogy, which at the time had a higher standing than the prequel trilogy that the original *Lego Star Wars* was based on. The follow-up's bonus content and the replay value it represented was also highlighted, as were its striking level designs.

Lego Star Wars II's construction-based and character-focussed puzzles were also warmly welcomed, and the Xbox version gained plaudits from Microsoft's marketing for bringing a younger audience to its console. Jon Burton credits the success of *Lego Star Wars II* to how well its component parts worked and how well they worked together, and he acknowledges how fortunate it was that the stars aligned so perfectly for it. "I think it's still one of the best Lego games ever made," Jon beams. "The humour was perfect – everything from discovering window-cleaning Stormtroopers to using hat machines to disguise your characters and the Stormtrooper helmet not fitting Chewie correctly! Those were all great visual gags. All of that coupled with a fun 'cosy game before-its-time' gameplay loop that meant kids could complete every level easily but the more skilled players could dig out all the secrets. It was also based on arguably the best film trilogy in history – so it was lightning in a bottle!" ✱

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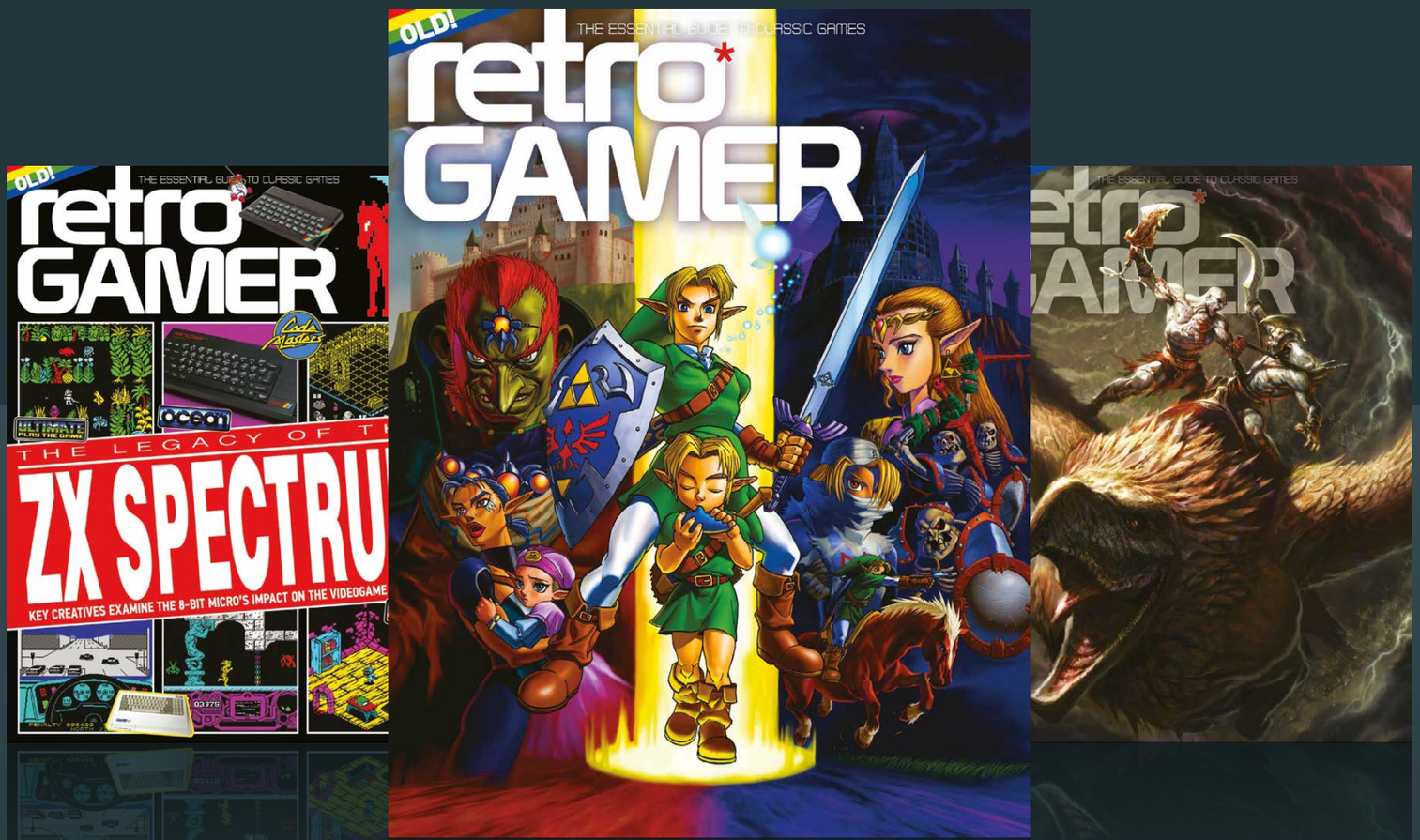

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THE RETRO GAMER GUIDE TO

THE SINCLAIR ZX81

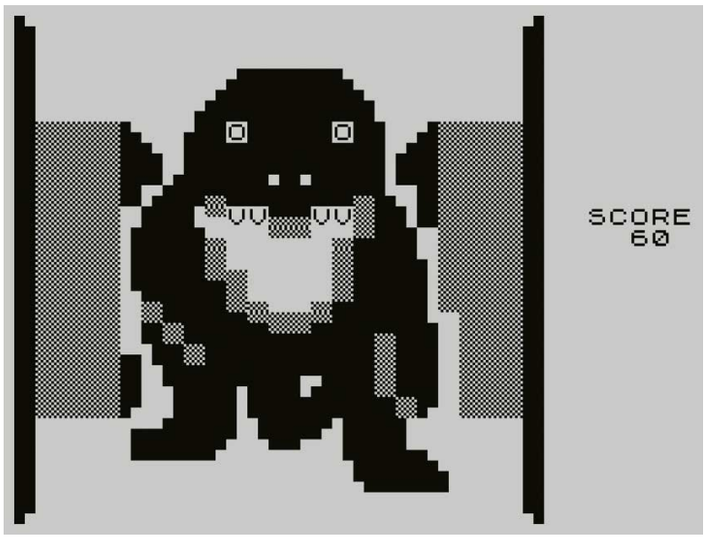
THE ZX81 WAS NOT SINCLAIR'S FIRST HOME COMPUTER, NOR ITS BEST-SELLING. BUT THERE'S A STRONG CASE FOR IT BEING ITS MOST IMPORTANT. JOIN US AS WE CELEBRATE THE ZX81'S 45TH ANNIVERSARY BY HIGHLIGHTING ITS KEY GAMES AND HEARING FROM THOSE WHO CHAMPION THE DIMINUTIVE MICRO

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

The ZX Spectrum is often seen as the plucky British computer that punched above its weight. But compared to the ZX81, the Speccy looked like IBM's Deep Blue supercomputer. Released in 1981, the ZX81 – or Zeddy – was the true underdog of the micro world. It came with 1KB of onboard memory, a low-res monochrome display, zero sound capabilities and a membrane keyboard that you had to prod. The hardware was hamstrung from the get-go, but it was affordable, costing just £49 for the DIY kit model, or £69 preassembled. That low entry point was crucial and the idea of owning a computer became a reality for many households. More than 400,000 ZX81s were sold during its first year, rising to 1 million by the end of its second.

With sales came opportunity and a cottage industry quickly sprang up to support the ZX81. Sinclair itself provided hardware add-ons, including the mandatory 16KB RAM pack, plus a range of branded software. But it was the third-party operators who propelled things forward. Custom hardware was released that addressed the micro's shortcomings. Games software was released that pushed the limits of the hardware. The Spectrum was released just 13 months after the ZX81, but Sinclair continued to sell it as an entry-level system. Ultimately though, the Speccy's price would soon drop, effectively making the ZX81 redundant. It would be discontinued in 1984 – though new software is still being written for it.

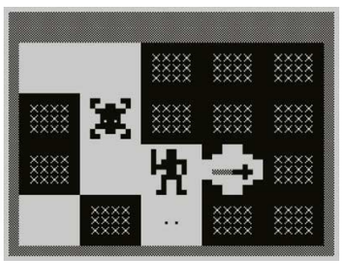
The ZX81 was the stepping stone that led to the Spectrum. Without its success, the Spectrum might never have happened, or at least would have taken a different form. So let's celebrate the Zeddy by rounding up 25 of its finest games, released between 1981 and the present day. ✱

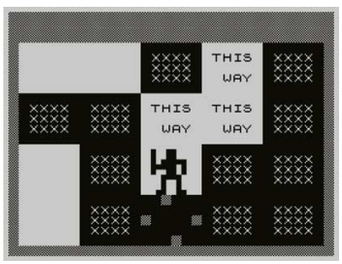


3D MONSTER MAZE 1981

DEVELOPER Malcolm Evans

■ "All in 3D, you've never seen anything like this before!" claimed the advert, and for once, it wasn't a lie. Malcolm Evans could not have made a bigger impact with this tense 3D maze game, where players are hunted down by a T-rex who unnervingly tracks your position. It arrived early in the ZX81's life, but no other release was as iconic or as influential as this one.





MAZOGS 1981

DEVELOPER Don Priestley

■ Many well-known programmers started out on the ZX81, including the author of this top-down maze game, Don Priestley. Don would go on to make his name on the Spectrum, but here we see an early example of his approach, using oversized sprites for added impact. Don later remade it for the Spectrum, but even with added colour and sound, it can't top the original.

3D DEFENDER 1981

DEVELOPER Malcolm Evans

■ How would Malcolm Evans follow up *3D Monster Maze*? He'd take his 3D technique, swap out a T-rex for UFOs, and add a shooting element. Despite the title, this isn't really inspired by the Williams coin-op, being more of a simple shoot-'em-up. But the smoothness of the animation and the sense of speed are excellent. It's certainly more fun than Psion's *Flight Simulation*. ▶

THE MONSTER MAKER

MALCOLM EVANS ON HOW THE ZX81 KICK-STARTED HIS SECOND CAREER AS A THIRTY-SOMETHING GAMES PROGRAMMER

What was it that attracted you to the ZX81, Malcolm?

The simple answer is chance or fate. I was working in an aerospace company and I found I couldn't transfer from hardware to software. Software was a young man's game. I was 37. However, when my wife bought me a ZX81 for my birthday, I felt obliged to see what it could do.

Early ZX81 games were simple affairs. What inspired you to aim so high with *3D Monster Maze*?

I was learning to program, continuing my career of research to see what was possible. My first routine for the ZX81 was a maze generation algorithm. I first used 2D graphics, then 3D, to display its results. I animated a monster and turned it into a game. You don't need racks of computer power to achieve something, only ideas. When the buyer for WHSmith saw *3D Monster Maze* at an early computer fair, I was invited to see him. The rest is history. The idea came at the right time, as the company I was working for closed down.

"YOU DON'T NEED RACKS OF COMPUTER POWER TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING, ONLY IDEAS" MALCOLM EVANS

You managed to get a version of *Breakout* running in 1KB of memory. How difficult was this?

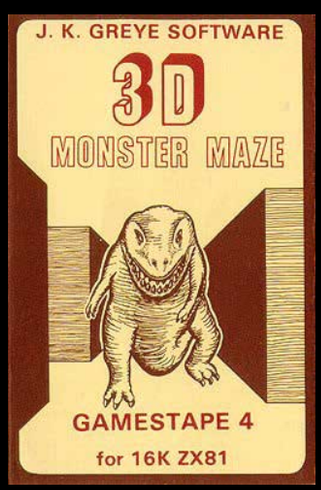
While discussing the first order with WHSmith's buyer, he commented that you couldn't do anything in 1KB. I mentioned I had a *Breakout* game in 1KB. It had been another experiment. He asked to see it. I knew I was still slightly over 1KB, so I spent the weekend reducing it. I met my target and he agreed to sell it.

The Spectrum is seen as a vast improvement over the ZX81. Is that how you found it?

The problem with the Spectrum was that the processor was the same as the ZX81, but the operating system slowed it down. Add to that the screen location was static and, being in colour, more complex, so it was usually not possible to completely refresh within the frame period. Hence, the picture flickered. This became ubiquitous in most games. On the ZX81, it was easier since the screen memory was switchable, so the picture could be computed offline, avoiding flicker. In fact, a sequence of images could be computed offline and displayed dynamically, like explosions.

How pleasing is it that people still remember your games and the effect they had?

It's still a wonder to me that my games gave such pleasure to so many. I thought it was only my pleasure that I was fulfilling. Now, I hear from programmers who say my games introduced them to programming, that they have even studied the code. Now at 82, I am continually delighted to hear their stories. I owe a lot to that time in my life. After New Generation Software closed, I returned to the spacecraft industry, slipping more easily into software. I spent the last 12 years of my career solely writing spacecraft software, including the graphics software library for the Beagle 2 Mars lander.



THE FOOTBALL MANAGER

KEVIN TOMS TAKES US BACK TO THE EARLIEST DAYS OF FOOTBALL MANAGER, WHEN HE RELEASED HIS SIM FOR THE ZX81

When, and why, did you convert *Football Manager* to the ZX81, Kevin?

I already had the game working on the Video Genie, a TRS-80 clone. There was a market there, but, in today's terms that machine cost something like £2,000, so it was not mass market. When the ZX81 came along I could see it was better than the ZX80, because it was normally sold complete, not as a self-assembly product, which would have a limited market made up of enthusiasts. Most importantly, the low price – about one quarter of the TRS-80 – opened up a much bigger market.

The ZX81 hardware is basic. How did you find writing software for it?

My game was text only so that helped, but the other limitations were drastic. [It had] so little memory that I had to worry about the number of teams in each division, the number of players, and how long, or more specifically how short their names were. The shorter the better! I managed to get four divisions in though and I saw that as essential. But yes, it was a battle with memory and device limitations. And algorithms had to be carefully crafted to be minimum-sized.

Did you make any modifications to the machine, for programming purposes?

No, I coded directly on the machine, and saved to tape like everyone else. This also meant sometimes the RAM pack wobble would lose me hours of work. So, I would try to stop frequently to make a save.

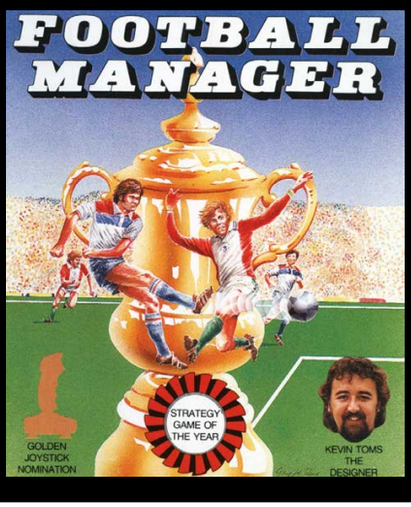
How successful was *Football Manager* on the ZX81, in terms of sales, and establishing a foundation for the game?

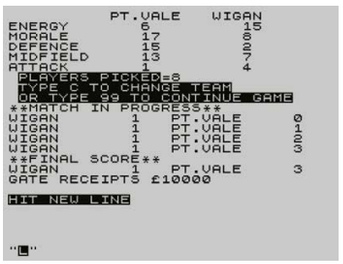
The game sold in the hundreds in the early months by mail order only, and also the ratio of sales was 100 ZX81 copies for each TRS-80 copy. If I had not launched on the ZX81 as well, the TRS-80 orders wouldn't even have covered a small percentage of the cost of the magazine advertising. So the ZX81 was critical.

The ZX81 is often seen as the stepping stone to the Spectrum. Is that how you would view Sinclair's computer?

Absolutely. You can also see the design pathway of Sinclair which was incrementally improving until the strategic error with the QL and microdrives. It also established the cottage industry of game developers, often self-publishing via mail order as I did. We found there was a market with the ZX81 and were able to confidently adopt the Spectrum, and once again, the entry price for the Spectrum was expanding the market. In my case, the extra memory and graphics allowed me to expand the game – which already had good gameplay on the ZX81 – in ways that made it an even better game.

"THE RATIO OF SALES WAS 100 ZX81 COPIES FOR EACH TRS-80 COPY" KEVIN TOMS





(P IN TEAM,I INJURED)
NAME NO. SKILL ENERGY VALUE
G.BAILEY 1 2 14 £10000
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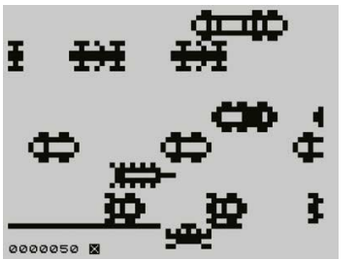
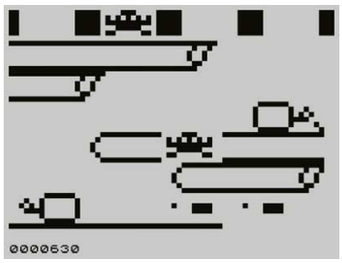
P.NEAL 3 2 13 £10000
B.BONDS 5 3 16 £15000
K.BURNS 6 4 12 £20000
M.BUCHAN 7 2 13 £10000
R.VILLA 9 5 8 £25000
L.MACARI 10 5 12 £25000
G.MILLS 11 4 8 £20000
D.TUEART 12 4 10 £20000
A.EVANS 15 1 14 £5000
J.WARK 17 4 9 £20000
TYPE NO. OF PLAYER TO SELL
OR TYPE 99 TO CONTINUE GAME
PLAYERS PICKED=11

FOOTBALL MANAGER 1981

DEVELOPER Kevin Toms

■ Kevin Toms developed the original *Football Manager* for the TRS-80, but it was this port that propelled the game into the big leagues. Later versions would add animated graphics and other enhancements, but the core game was here, fully formed and ready to steal months from your life. Type '99' to continue, and continue, and continue…

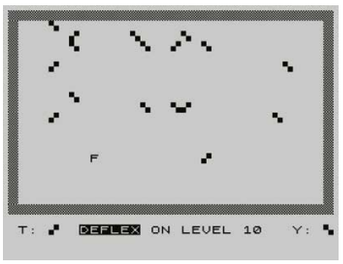




FROGGER 1981

DEVELOPER Cornsoft/Bob Pappas

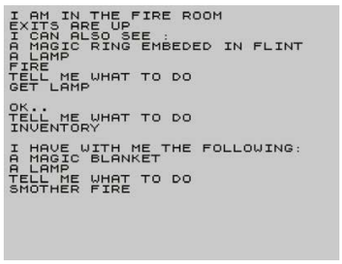
■ Amid all the clones (*Froggy*, *Frogs*, *Hopper* etc) there was this unique release: an officially licensed coin-op conversion. It was developed for the Timex 1000, the ZX81's US equivalent, which explains its above board nature. Author Bob Pappas placed the road and river on separate screens to account for the large character sprites.



DEFLEX 1981

DEVELOPER Jeff Minter

■ This early Jeff Minter title, based on a 1979 program he wrote for the Commodore PET while at college, is a fast-paced puzzler where you place bats to deflect the ball to your target. It's deceptively simple, as it quickly becomes manic (and rather unmanageable) as you add more bats. A two-player 'sequel' is also available, in which you deflect the ball into your opponent's goal.



INCA CURSE 1981

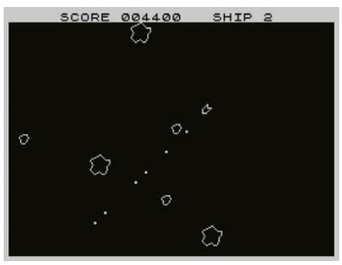
DEVELOPER Artic/Charles Cecil

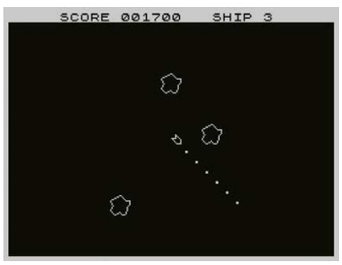
■ There weren't a huge amount of text adventures available, mainly because memory was limited and the 'keyboard' didn't lend itself to lots of typing. But Artic did publish a range, including this, an early effort of Charles Cecil (who would later cofound Revolution Software). It's a basic treasure quest with simple puzzles and just enough locations to get lost in.

THE GAUNTLET 1982

DEVELOPER Colourmatic

There are a bunch of *Scramble* clones available for the ZX81 and this is our pick. Unlike most, you're not just limited to moving up and down, and it uses character graphics to good effect, being chunky but serviceable (your lasers are full stops and your bombs are semicolons, but hey, it works). What's most impressive is that it's faithful to the source, featuring all six stages.

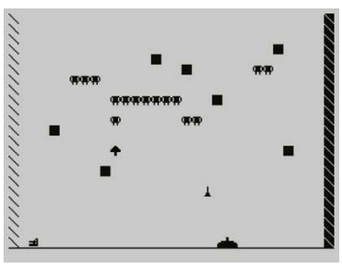


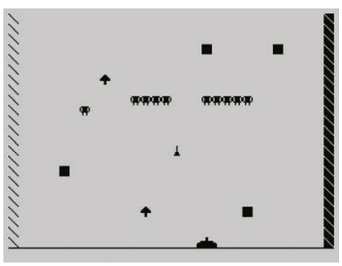


QS ASTEROIDS 1982

DEVELOPER Quicksilva

Quicksilva's Character Board was a hardware solution that allowed the ZX81's stock character graphics to be redefined, allowing for high-resolution graphics. Several of its own titles supported the board, including this version of *Asteroids*. Without the board it is almost unplayable, but with it, it becomes a great little clone of the hit coin-op. The QS Sound Board is also supported, adding spot effects.





CENTIPEDE 1982

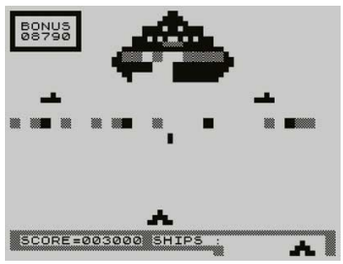
DEVELOPER Jeff Minter

An alternative to Quicksilva's board was the Graphics ROM from dk'Tronics which also improved the computer's sprite capabilities. Jeff Minter produced various arcade clones that supported the add-on, including *Space Invaders* and this lively version of Atari's coin-op. Having formed Llamasoft, Jeff would go on to write an enhanced version for the VIC-20 called *Gridrunner*…

1K ZX CHESS 1982

DEVELOPER David Horne

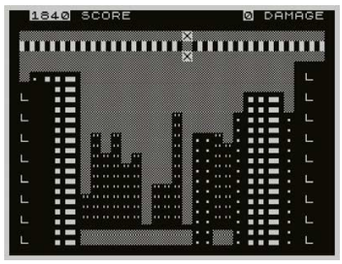
The ZX81 came with just 1KB of memory – and that had to be shared with the display – so most software required a 16KB RAM pack to run. But not this fully functioning chess game by David Horne, which occupies just 672 bytes of memory. How was this extraordinary programming feat possible? The author revealed all in *Your Computer* magazine, sharing his source code.

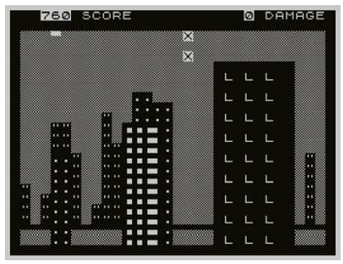


INVASION FORCE 1982

DEVELOPER Simon Wadsworth

Phoenix is famous for being one of the first arcade games to feature a boss battle, and this Artic release does a sterling job of recreating that climatic showdown. It presents a genuine challenge, as you chip away at the mothership's defences, trying to expose its vulnerable core, while avoiding asterisks of doom. It's a shame none of the coin-op's other stages are included.

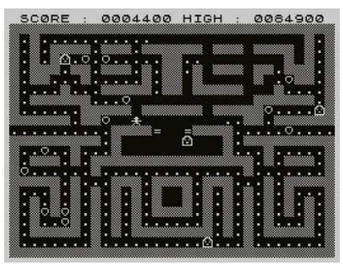


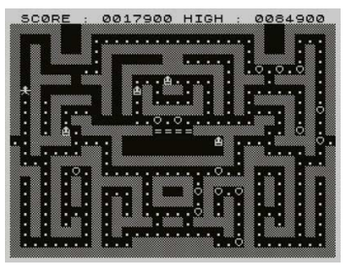


CITY BOMBER 1982

DEVELOPER Don Priestley

Another Don Priestley masterclass showing off his early ambition. The city you're tasked with protecting from alien ships is viewed side-on, and as you scan left and right, four levels of parallax scrolling are revealed. On a ZX81! It highlights how fast graphics could be thrown at the screen – with the right coding expertise, of course.

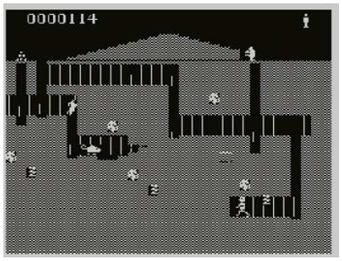


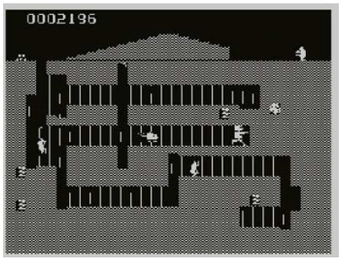


PUCKMAN 1982

DEVELOPER John Hardman

Cheekily borrowing *Pac-Man*'s original Japanese title, this early Hewson release is probably the best clone available. It actually builds on the original, featuring multiple maze layouts (including some devious ones with dead ends). It also features support for the Quicksilva Character Board to drop in proper high-res sprites.

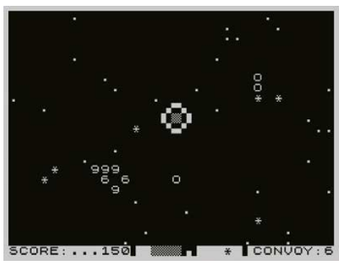


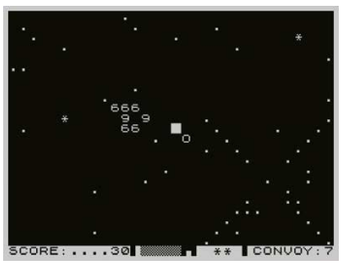


FORTY NINER 1982

DEVELOPER Julian Chappell

■ This was a milestone release, being the first of note to feature pseudo high-res graphics – without the need for any additional hardware. Yes, ZX Spectrum resolution on the stock ZX81. It's not just a tech demo either, being a solid dig-'em-up with nods to *The Pit* and *Dig Dug*. Author-slash-wizard Julian Chappell would go on to produce three further games in his high-res range.

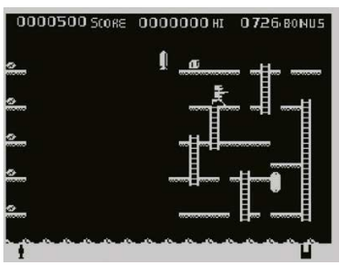




ASTRAL CONVOY 1983

DEVELOPER Costa Panayi

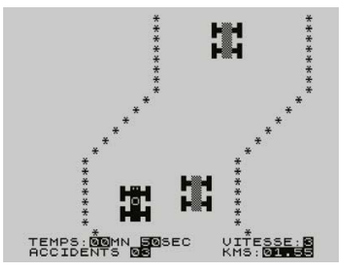
■ Costa Panayi is another programmer who started out on the ZX81 before finding fame on the Spectrum. This strategic shooter sees you scanning a scrolling star field, trying to protect a cargo ship from invaders. The graphics are simple characters but the concept elevates it above the glut of space shooters. It was also released for the Spectrum, under the title *Cosmos*.



ROCKET MAN 1984

DEVELOPER Julian Chappell

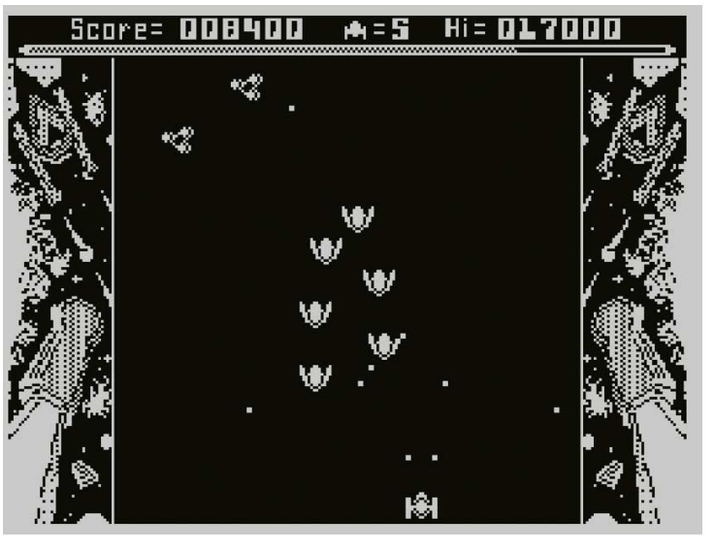
■ The second of Software Farm's high-res range is an even better game than *Forty Niner*. It's a platform and ladders affair where you have to gather up fuel for your jetpack, while avoiding a blob of death. You then fly across the water to grab the diamonds. A 1985 sequel, *Booster*, was only available via mail order – a sign that the ZX81's commercial life was waning.



STOCK CAR 1984

DEVELOPER
Informatique Service

■ Sinclair sold the ZX81 in France, resulting in a small library of home-grown software. This fun example is a version of Sega's *Monaco GP*. You race along a never-ending road, shifting through five gears as you overtake rivals. When you hit the ten-kilometre mark, you enter a tunnel and the game pulls off the headlights effect from the coin-op. Very cool.



STARFIGHT 2001

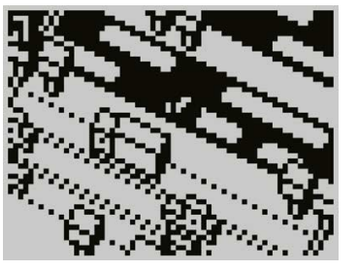
DEVELOPER Martin Korth

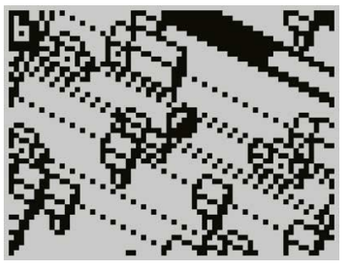
■ Moving into the post-commercial era we find ourselves playing a game displaying true high-resolution graphics (check out those sprites, and the border). *StarFight* utilises the WRX board, developed by Wilf Rigter, to deliver a frantic arcade shooter. The game is based on an old Amstrad CPC type-in listing. The author has since ported Activision's *HERO* and *Beamrider* to the ZX81.

MANIC MINER 2003

DEVELOPER Ales Martinik

■ Software Projects released *Manic Miner* for every system going, bar the primitive ZX81 of course. Years later, Ales Martinik delivered a version of the game. The sprites are a little glitchy, and only 11 of the 20 caverns are included, but this remains an amazing technical achievement. Matthew Smith himself has expressed his astonishment at seeing this version running.

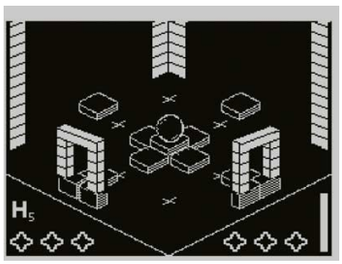


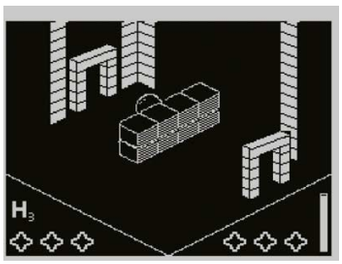


CROZXY ROAD 2015

DEVELOPER Bob Smith

■ Bob Smith has become the ZX81 de-make expert, coding up versions of *Ant Attack*, *Pipe Mania*, *Arkanoid* and more. They're all worth playing, but we love this interpretation of the hit 'one-more-go' game *Crossy Road* that uses the standard character set to excellent effect. Not only was it permitted by the original creator Hipster Whale, but the studio also suggested the playful title.

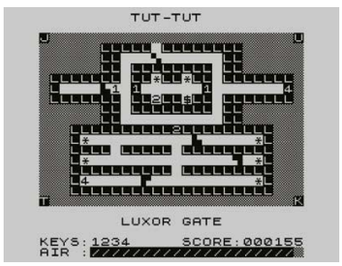




AGAINST THE ELEMENTS 2016

DEVELOPER Paul Farrow

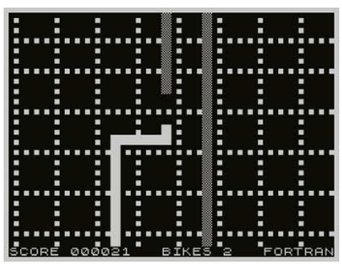
■ It's a question that has kept homebrewers up at night – can a stock ZX81 handle a Filmation-style Ultimate game? Paul Farrow provided the answer on the micro's 35th anniversary with this wonderful isometric game. Again, this is not just a proof of concept. It's an engaging adventure in which you play a hydrogen bubble searching the atomic world for the six noble gases.



TUT-TUT 2023

DEVELOPER David Stephenson

■ Based on a Spectrum type-in game by the same author, the ZX81 version has been enhanced with 28 tombs to raid, plus one hidden stage. There's no graphical trickery here – just a brilliant maze game that requires forward thinking and fast reactions. Be warned: it starts out simple but quickly gets brutal. An equally strong sequel, *Minoss Knossos*, followed in 2024.



ASTRO BIKERS 2023

DEVELOPER
Jonathan Cauldwell

■ This is an impressive take on *Tron*'s Light Cycles by homebrew champion Jonathan Cauldwell that features fast, full-screen scrolling and – shock! – support for colour graphics. Like a lot of modern releases it supports the Chroma 81 interface which adds lovely Spectrum-like colour if detected.

COSMIC PAYBACK 2025

DEVELOPER John Connolly

■ Another game that started out on the Spectrum before the author looked at the old Zeddy and thought, "I wonder…" Playing like a mix of *Bounder* and *Trailblazer*, the game sees you bouncing a ball through 15 devious levels, collecting gold and avoiding traps. Play it to see just how far ZX81 games have come.

THE ZX81 ARCHIVIST

SIMON HOLDSWORTH REVEALS HOW THE COLLECTING BUG LED TO THE CREATION OF THE ZX81 STUFF ONLINE ARCHIVE

When did you first use a ZX81, and what impact did it have, Simon?

I gained a scholarship to senior school at age 13 and my parents bought me a ZX81 as a reward. They had a portable 9-inch black-and-white television which I was allowed to use. I still remember playing *Meteors* from the *Games 1* tape and competing with my older brother and father for time on the computer. During this time I started to learn how to program. After a couple of years I graduated to a Spectrum, funded by selling my ZX81 and tape collection. This experience had a fundamental effect on my career path. At university I took computer science options and thoroughly enjoyed the practical aspects of programming, building on the experience I had gained from the ZX81 and Spectrum. This led to getting a job at a large IT company where I have worked ever since.

"I'VE BEEN CONTACTED BY SOFTWARE AUTHORS WHO THOUGHT THEIR WORK WAS LOST, ONLY TO FIND IT ON MY WEBSITE" SIMON HOLDSWORTH

What prompted you to create the ZX81 Stuff site?

In the early days of eBay, I searched for the ZX81 and, amazed at what was available, ended up starting a new collection. I spent a lot of time on the World Of Spectrum website, and concluded I could do something similar to showcase my collection, preserve all I could from this short period of history, and make it available for others to see. I developed my own tape conversion program to allow me to recover programs from poor quality or damaged tapes, and converted a ZX81 emulator into Javascript so the games can be played in a browser window. I've been contacted several times by software authors who thought their work was lost, only to find it on my website, which makes the whole exercise worthwhile.

How easy, or indeed difficult was it to acquire all the items?

When I first started collecting it was easy to buy job lots on eBay, selling off duplicates and cobbling together working ZX81s from parts to fund further purchases. All the material on the site is scanned from items I have owned in my collection. As my collection expanded it did become harder and harder to find missing tapes. It got to the point where pretty much any tape I didn't have would go for more than £100 on eBay, and I can't justify that sort of spending.

Is there any 'grail' software you would love to acquire?

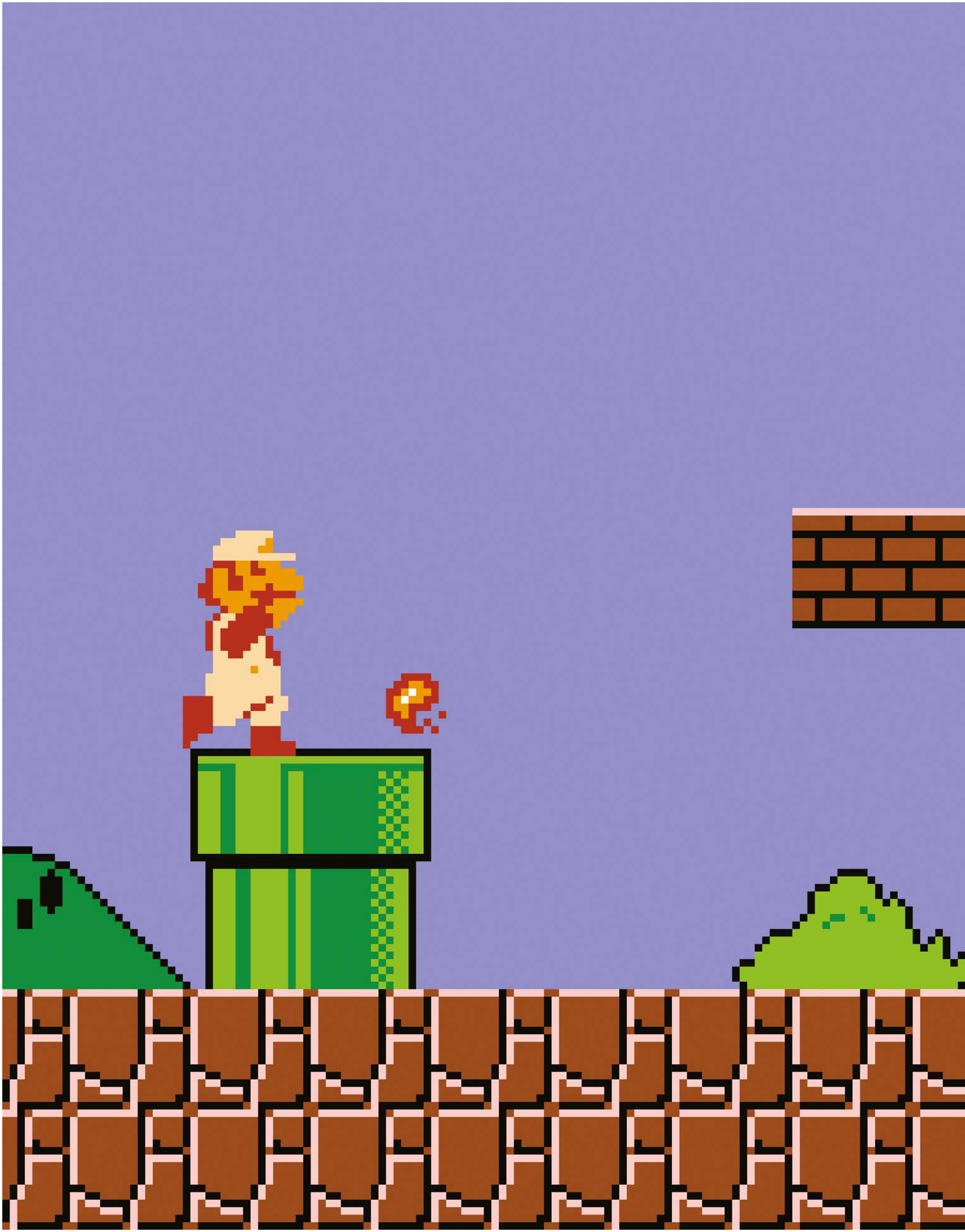
I've got quite a few tapes by Macronics and dk'Tronics. I'd love to fill out those collections. I've seen several tapes by Algor on eBay but never managed to win those auctions. But overall, really, just anything I'm missing.

Do you have any future plans for the site?

I've not really spent any time on the site in the last few years, just keeping it running which has been helped by donations from generous visitors. I am intending to revisit the site as a retirement project – when I get there!

You can visit Simon's site at zx81stuff.org.uk

» Simon maintains the ZX81 Stuff treasure trove. Definitely go and take a look.



Super Mario Bros

"JUST ONE MORE GO, NAN"

» NES » 1985 » NINTENDO R&D1

If you're under the age of 30 you'll probably have no idea that you used to be able to buy videogames in Boots. And I don't just mean a bunch of budget games being sold on a rack next to the counter, I mean proper full-price videogames and hardware.

Whenever I stayed with my grandparents at weekends, I always enjoyed going to the shopping centre in Boscombe because my nan would let me hang out in Boots while she did her food shopping. Boots was where I had my first hands-on encounter with not only *Super Mario Bros*, but an actual NES. I didn't know a single person at the time who owned one, but I'd obviously seen adverts on TV and the images in magazines made it look miles better than my Amstrad CPC 464.

There was normally always a queue in front of the NES (particularly when ROB was on display) and there was always a member of staff close by to shoo kids away if they started to congregate there. Some weeks I had no chance of getting a game in because my nan would arrive before it was my turn to play, or I'd be told to vacate the area by a staff member. Occasionally though it would be super quiet and I'd have the display console all to myself.

I absolutely loved playing *Super Mario Bros*. It felt a world away from the jerky platform games I used to play on my Amstrad and it felt more like an arcade game – it was so smooth and mechanically tight. Sadly, I never really saw much beyond the first few levels due to always running out of time. Whenever I seemed to make any significant progress my nan would always turn up and tell me that we'd be late for the bus. "Just one more go, nan," I'd plead, but my request always fell on deaf ears.

I became an expert at those first few stages and was able to clear them incredibly quickly. Unfortunately, those skills are no longer with me. The memory of what I need to do is there, but my reactions just won't allow it. I may have to boot up the NES Mini and see if I can improve my times. ✱

THE MAKING OF SKYFOX

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BUDOKAN: THE MARTIAL SPIRIT (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1989

KASPAROV'S GAMBIT
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 1993

BLAZING DRAGONS
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION, SATURN
RELEASED: 1996

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS/ ARIOLASOFT
- **DEVELOPER:** RAY TOBEY
- **PLATFORM:** APPLE II, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1984
- **GENRE:** ACTION SIMULATION

IT WAS EVERY KID'S DREAM IN THE EIGHTIES: TO WRITE A HIT COMPUTER GAME, MEET YOUR HEROES AND GO ON TO ENJOY A CAREER IN SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT. FOR PHILADELPHIA RESIDENT RAY TOBEY, IT DIDN'T QUITE WORK OUT THAT WAY – BUT IT WAS A HELLUVA RIDE

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

» [Apple II] The Skyfox chases down an enemy plane.

» [Apple II] *Skyfox*'s exciting opening scene.

» [Apple II] With its fast gameplay and dramatic action, *Skyfox* was a hit on the Apple computer.

» [Apple II] *Skyfox*'s incongruous loading screen – all the action takes place in or above the planet.

As with many people growing up in the Seventies, Ray Tobey had a fascination with all things electronic. "I liked to take things apart," he grins. "Clocks, telephones… I once soldered together a Heathkit radio." These kits enabled enthusiasts to assemble their own electronics while learning the inner workings of the devices. "Back then, every mad scientist had a Jacob's Ladder," says Ray enigmatically. "So, I bent two coat hangers into the right shape and nailed them to a board before plugging them into an outlet. BANG!" While it sounds like Ray was trying to ascend to heaven for real, he soon realised the problem. "There were little bits of metal everywhere – I didn't know that you needed a transformer to get the right voltage. From that moment on, I got my little brother to plug in my experiments."

It wasn't long before Ray graduated to computers. "Our school offered a short computer class during the summer. A few of us learned BASIC on the school's admin computer, a Wang 2200A. It had a screen and a keyboard integrated into a desk, with 8-inch floppy drives where the drawers normally were. The school also had an OSI Challenger 1P. We played games such as *Lunar Lander* on these machines." And, of course, there were the arcades. "My younger brother and I were late-Seventies arcade nuts," smiles Ray. "Dom could put a quarter in an *Asteroids* machine and play for hours – after filling the bottom row of the screen with spare ships, he'd sometimes sell his game for several dollars. I liked *Battlezone*, but my favourite was *Stargate*. Years later, I bought a *Joust* machine, and played that late at night and into the morning."

Eventually, Ray looked to combine his two pursuits and create his own computer game. "My best friend, Chris, and I read that *Byte* magazine was hosting a game contest, so we started working together to make something. We wanted to connect the parallel ports together so our two computers could talk to each other – that way, we could play a competitive game on two screens. We did get the machines to exchange bytes, but we missed the contest deadline by a mile and moved on to other things." Despite this, the teenagers remained keen, joining their local user group, the Philadelphia Area Computer Society, or PACS. "Retired engineers, working people and a bunch of kids, met once a month," remembers Ray. "Age and experience didn't matter, because computers were so new." The new tech became the great leveller, uniting young and old in this exciting new world. "We were all trying to figure them out, and showing off what we could accomplish."

> "AGE AND EXPERIENCE DIDN'T MATTER, BECAUSE COMPUTERS WERE SO NEW"
> RAY TOBEY

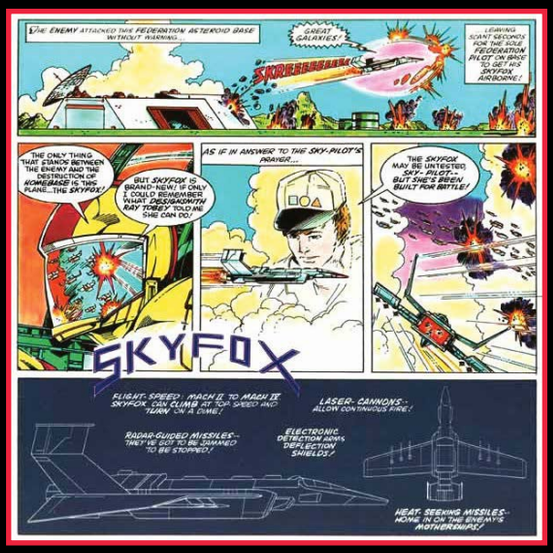
When several of the PACS group decided to drive up to Boston's Applefest, Ray tagged along. "It was a big show with an exhibit hall of company booths, lectures and panel discussions. A few years earlier, software was sold in plastic sandwich bags; the Applefest featured home-computer hardware and software as real professional products. Everything was changing quickly, and our user group crowd loved it."

By this point, Ray and Chris had already been working on what would eventually become *Skyfox*. Inspired by the arcade game *Star Wars*, they had started the project at just 16 years old, developing in assembly language on the Apple II. Then, just before and at the Applefest, a sequence of events occurred that changed Ray's life forever. "Not long before Applefest, a Mockingboard sound card arrived in the post. I hadn't ordered one, so its arrival was a mystery," Ray explains, although he suspects today that it was thanks to someone at the PACS. "At the show, I went to the Sweet Micro booth [the card's manufacturers] to thank them for the card. I showed them our game on their large screen. They were very impressed with my little demo, and asked me to come back later that day to meet someone." When ▶

TO THE STARS

THE HUGE SUCCESS OF SKYFOX INSPIRED SEQUELS, BOTH OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL

Keen to capitalise on the success of Ray's shooter sim, Electronic Arts commissioned Dynamix (which had handled some of the original's ports) to develop a sequel. Foreshadowing the appearance of the *Wing Commander* series, *Skyfox II: The Cygnus Conflict* takes the fight to outer space in the new Skyfox II Warp Fighter. The destination is the Cygnus system, the xenomorphs' home, and the mission is the elimination of the alien threat, once and for all. While, like its predecessor, it is technically superb, Dynamix failed to build on the uncomplicated gameplay of *Skyfox* on the Commodore 64. Yes, blasting away merrily while jetting between star systems never loses its appeal, but *Skyfox II*'s wealth of missions offers precious little variety, something that the original could get away with in 1985, but not this game in 1987. Amiga and PC (1988) and Atari ST (1989) versions followed, but none came close to matching the impact of Ray Tobey's arcade shooter masterpiece. Oddly, the European distributor of *Skyfox*, Germany's Ariolasoft, decided to have a stab at an unofficial sequel, too. Released in 1987 on the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad and Commodore 64, *Skyfox* (unrelated to the 1993 Super Nintendo game) was designed by space shooter experts Realtime Games, with Ariolasoft cheekily declaring "The Fox Is Back" on its back cover.


THE ENEMY ATTACKED THIS FEDERATION ASTEROID BASE WITHOUT WARNING...
GREAT GALAXIES!
SKREEEEEEEE
LEAVING SCANT SECONDS FOR THE SOLE FEDERATION PILOT ON BASE TO GET HIS SKYFOX AIRBORNE!
THE ONLY THING THAT STANDS BETWEEN THE ENEMY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF HOMEBASE IS THIS PLANE...THE SKYFOX!
BUT SKYFOX IS BRAND-NEW! IF ONLY I COULD REMEMBER WHAT DESIGNATION RAY TOBEY TOLD ME SHE CAN DO!
AS IF IN ANSWER TO THE SKY-PILOT'S PRAYER...
THE SKYFOX MAY BE UNTESTED SKY-PILOT--BUT SHE'S BEEN BUILT FOR BATTLE!
SKYFOX
FLIGHT-SPEED: MACH 2, TO MACH 11 SKYFOX CAN CLIMB AT TOP SPEED AND TURN ON A DIME!
LASER-CANNONS--ALLOW CONTINUOUS FIRE!
RADAR-GUIDED MISSILES--THEY'VE GOT TO BE JAMMED TO BE STOPPED!
ELECTRONIC DETECTION AIMS DEFLECTION SHIELDS!
HEAT-SEEKING MISSILES--HOME IN ON THE ENEMY'S MOTHERSHIPS!

» His likeness in the *Skyfox* comic strip earned Ray Tobey the nickname 'Tobi-wan-Kenobi'.

» [Apple II] Lots to destroy. Lots to save. Better get on with it.

the young man returned, he found none other than Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak waiting for him. Ray again demonstrated his demo, showing off the first-person cockpit view and mountains bobbing in the distance as F-15-style planes zipped past. Plus, of course, music and sound effects from his new sound card. "On seeing it, Woz exclaimed that an Apple II couldn't do that!" grins Ray. "He then proceeded to tell me about a new software company that was starting up, called Electronic Arts."

It wasn't just Steve Wozniak; the *Skyfox* demo (or *Alpha Strike* as it was known at this point) impressed everybody. "I was 12 years old when *Star Wars* came out," remembers Ray. "I was blown away, and saw it more than 20 times at the cinema. I cut school the first day *The Empire Strikes Back* was out, waiting in line with all the costumed fans." The famous sci-fi series became the initial inspiration for *Skyfox*. "The visual art and dynamic motion entranced me. But my favourite games, like *Wizardry* and *MULE*, featured engaging gameplay – as a teenager, I wasn't up to creating that kind of depth." Instead, Ray designed his game around a simple precept: an alien invasion via both ground and air, with motherships controlling enemy planes and tanks, and as much variety as possible within this concept.

> "TRIP, (ELECTRONIC ARTS) PLEASE CONSIDER THIS FLIGHT SIMULATOR AS THE FINEST APPLE GAME EVER DONE. WOZ"
> STEVE WOZNIAK

Back to the show. An incredulous Wozniak hands Ray his business card. Scrawled on the back are the words, "Trip, (Electronic Arts) Please consider this flight simulator as the finest Apple game ever done. Woz."

A few days later, Ray and his parents were on a flight to California. "We were in a room at the end of a long corridor, with cubicles on each side," recalls Ray. "As I talked to Trip [Hawkins, EA's founder], a young guy walked towards us. He wore ragged, cut-off jeans, a blue tank top, and half-gloves. A studded black leather belt complemented his mohawk; a pair of handcuffs connected it." This unusual figure was Jim Nitchals, author of *Microwave*, the first Apple II game to play music from the internal speaker during play. Already, Ray appreciated the enormity of what Nitchals had achieved, and the pair became good friends. "It was an incredible accomplishment of machine language cycle counting. And his clothing style was much more conventional most of the time I knew him!"

Still at school (now a high-school senior), Ray was having difficulty focussing on his studies. He nevertheless graduated and, around six months later, arrived at

CONVERSION CAPERS

RETRO GAMER AIMS AT THE MAIN VERSIONS OF SKYFOX

APPLE II

■ Impossibly fast, intuitive to play and exciting, *Skyfox* remains an outstanding piece of software for the Apple computer. There are no complicated flight controls or obtuse map-reading; its autopilot handles navigation, leaving you to focus on the fun bit – destroying the alien tanks, planes and motherships.

C64

■ Arriving in late-summer 1985, *Skyfox* stunned Commodore gamers and critics alike, continuing a significant uptick in software quality on the computer. While critics cited the game's average audio, everybody loved the sheer pace and excitement, combined with the excellent sense of realism.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ All the ingredients are present, but *Skyfox* on the Amstrad, released in spring 1986, falls a little short of the other versions. The main issue is technical: its juddering display fractures in places, and while there's value for shoot-'em-up fans, the grinding engine noise gets very irritating, very quickly.

ZX SPECTRUM

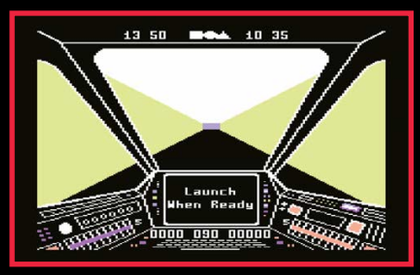
■ With development duties once more in the hands of Ray Tobey, Spectrum *Skyfox* slipped into 1986 – but the wait was worth it. Inevitable sacrifices in colour and sound aside, it's a decent port by Ray, emulating the action-flight-sim ethic of the original with no serious loss of playability.

Electronic Arts for his first day working with the new company. "It had been in 'stealth' mode up until that point," he divulges. EA invited Ray to its first Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Chicago in 1984. There, he was 'wined and dined' by Trip Hawkins, and duly signed a contract to produce the fighter simulation for the new software publisher, initially working from home and funnelling the Apple II code through a brand-new 1,200-baud modem.

It wasn't just the name that changed – *Skyfox* originally had different gameplay, before reality bit. "I was zealous about fitting stuff into memory," says Ray. "Originally, the [enemy] tanks and planes were all visible at the same time, with the mountains in the background." As *Skyfox* became more complex, memory became tighter, and Ray had to find ways to fit everything in while maintaining the game's spirit. "Eventually, we split the game into two parts, below the clouds and above. I still regret that decision." Having spent much time on compression algorithms since, Ray ponders whether he could have fixed *Skyfox*'s memory issues with what he knows today.

With a contract in place, the work became serious, moving away from the bedroom-coder ethic Ray had previously enjoyed. "Debugging was the worst," he winces, "and my worst bug was a crash that seemed to occur randomly in play." Fortunately, Ray now had the expertise and support of Electronic Arts on tap. "I found [the bug] with EA's Atron Probe, an in-circuit emulator," he says. "You pulled the 6502 out of the motherboard and plugged an exotic cable into its place. That led to a separate screen and keyboard that let you watch the code run, disassemble it and set breakpoints." Ray duly located the bug, a rogue memory write that was clobbering code elsewhere in his program. "But the real benefit of working with EA was the people," he continues. "Most of its R&D staff came from Xerox PARC – that's the group that invented the mouse, desktop metaphor and its icons, and most of the ideas that have driven computing since." While Ray admits he was a 'hacker', figuring things out through trial and error, these experts were experienced, seasoned computing professionals. "I learned a lot of fantastic stuff from them."

» [Apple II] Destroying these vast floating citadels is a priority.



» [C64] The enemies come thick and fast in the later invasion-based levels.

» [Atari ST] The tactical display reveals the location of nearby enemy units.

ATARI ST

■ Created by developer Dynamix, *Skyfox*'s 16-bit ports appeared in 1989 to stiffer competition from the likes of MicroProse's *Gunship*. While certainly an upgrade in terms of display, the extra processing power and memory are sadly left unused, resulting in a fun but ultimately unfulfilling game.

AMIGA

■ At almost double the price of its predecessor, Amiga owners were quite justified in expecting a bit more than the fly-around-and-shoot-stuff gameplay. 16-bit *Skyfox* again doesn't quite satisfy in this respect, but for some undemanding blasting, you couldn't go wrong, especially with its fantastic sound effects and music.

MAC

■ Dynamix stepped in again with this Macintosh version of *Skyfox*, which looks very different from the Apple II game but plays similarly. There's a lack of frills on the Macintosh, but for a platform that was hardly replete with action games, *Skyfox* was a good destination for a quick blast.

» The gold disk presented to Ray upon 100,000 sales of *Skyfox*. We reached out to Trip Hawkins, who told us the following. "Woz and I both loved Ray's original *Skyfox demo*, as did our producer, Stewart Bonn, who helped Ray finish our first big hit on the C64. Ray was a precocious technical wizard who made a 3D graphics game before there were 3D graphics. Ray also had a remarkable demeanor, always cool, calm and kind. I'm grateful to have been his publisher."

FROM PROGRAMMING TO POLITICS

HOW THE IRAQ WAR CHANGED RAY'S DIRECTION

Ray Tobey was working on an engine for a massive multiplayer game when the Iraq war broke out in 2003. Dismayed at the United States government for initiating the conflict, he attended protests before becoming a full-time political campaign volunteer, abandoning his coding career. He eventually became a campaign manager and political consultant, and has lately been involved with a website that teaches people how to win elections, focussing on school boards and city councils. "Working on games was fun," he notes, "but politics is not. But awful things are happening in the world because good people are bad at winning elections."

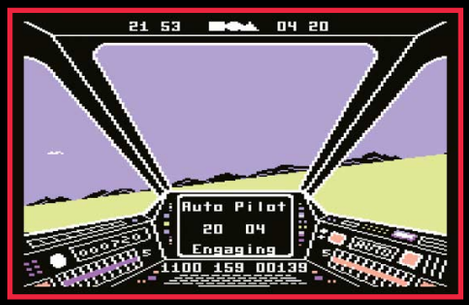
» Ray Tobey (centre) alongside RJ Mical (left) and former EA engineer David Maynard. Photo taken March 2026 at a party hosted by RJ Mical.

Electronic Arts, via its producer Stewart Bonn, also assisted with *Skyfox*'s art. "I'd drawn the cockpit, mountains and other art using an Apple graphics tablet – these were the days when most games were written by a handful of people, or even just one person – but we wanted the tank and plane sprites to look good from different angles." EA brought in artist RG Kelley to design the look of the enemy vehicles. "Of course, today, you'd do it with rendered 3D graphics, but in those days an artist would draw every pixel," continues Ray. With rotating 3D shapes beyond Ray's ability, Kelley designed the vehicles and, in a foreshadowing of today, the pair worked remotely, never once meeting in person.

The Apple II version finally completed, you'd have thought that maybe it was time for Ray to enjoy some well-earned rest. Not a chance. EA wanted more. "After the Apple, I rewrote almost everything for the Commodore 64," he reveals. This 'cleaner' version of *Skyfox* became the basis

BE THE WEAPON

RETRO GAMER'S GUIDE TO BEING THE ULTIMATE FOX OF THE SKIES



AUTOPILOT ACE

The Skyfox's autopilot is the most helpful device it has. With a simple key press (default 'A'), it takes the plane directly to either enemies or the home base, leaving the pilot to focus on shooting down enemy tanks and planes.

PLAN YOUR LOADOUT

Guided missiles are particularly effective against enemy planes. However, unlike the Skyfox's cannon, you have a limited amount. If you're likely to be up against a fleet of planes and multiple motherships, make sure you take enough of them into the battle.

USE THE TACTICAL MAP

Pressing 'C' brings up the Skyfox's tactical map, transmitted from the base computer. From here, you can track enemies and use the arrow keys to select a specific sector before engaging the autopilot and letting it take you there in double-quick time.

TARGET THE MOTHERSHIPS

Selecting Small Invasion or above pitches the player against at least one enemy mothership. These hovering fortresses launch fighters and tanks against your bases, so it's well worth prioritising their destruction. They're well fortified, so make sure you have some spare missiles to fling their way.

THE FUEL GAUGE

Keep an eye on the bar at the bottom left and right. This is your fuel indicator, and as *Skyfox*'s manual helpfully points out, running out of fuel in flight is fatal. Flying at high altitude and using afterburners depletes it quicker, so it's always best to know where your base is.

TRAIN, THEN PAIN

Skyfox offers an impressive range of missions and options within its limited gameplay, including seven diverse training missions. There are two ground-based courses, three aerial courses, and two more that combine land and air enemies. Use these missions to hone your skills against the alien menace.

» [Amiga] More detailed enemies await the *Skyfox* in the Amiga port.

for all the other ports, with Ray handling the fellow 8-bit games on the Amstrad and ZX Spectrum, while EA brought in Oregon-based developer Dynamix for the Amiga and Atari ST ports, plus the distinct Macintosh game. Busy writing code, Ray had little time for pleasantries. Stewart Bonn, a comic-book fan, commissioned comics artist Jackson 'Butch' Guice to design the game's eye-catching cover, a blonde, gold-clad hero jumping into their Skyfox fighter as the alien forces mass in the background. *Skyfox*'s cover marked it as more action-packed compared to the serious flight simulations of the time, with Ray himself appearing in one of its comic-book panels. As was Trip Hawkins' strategy, the packaging mimicked the music industry, a nine-inch folding album that became the tent-pole release for the new publisher.

The philosophy continued to the man behind the game, too, as Ray explains. "When Trip started Electronic Arts, his plan was to treat game programmers like rock stars. And they did a worldwide advertising campaign." It was a situation that'll strike a chord with anyone familiar with the demise of the UK's Imagine Software. "That kind of marketing was not good for a young guy like me," notes Ray. "I bought an exotic car, and became a bit too confident and full of myself." Released in 1984 (Apple II) and 1985 (C64), *Skyfox* became a shining light in a difficult era for software Stateside, helped by Electronic Arts' best-in-the-world distribution network, and helped to usher in a new era of American game production. According to Ray's royalty statements, it sold 317,545 copies in its first two years, the Commodore 64 version topping sales charts, resulting in a framed golden diskette award for its creator, another tradition from the music industry.

But for Ray, it was too much. Burned out from many years of intense work, he retreated to a rented house in California, dumping all his computers into a spare room. "Tim Mott, VP of engineering at EA, once said that *Skyfox* had ruined my life," says Ray. "I don't think that's quite right, but I had a lot to learn about real life in later years." When Ray began work as a contractor, the entire Electronic Arts staff gathered around a conference table at 5pm each Friday. Post-sabbatical, he joined the company full time in 1988, working on the martial arts game *Budokan*, but by 1990, it numbered more than a thousand people, spread all over the world. Feeling the company's character had changed, Ray left but still recalls that time fondly, despite the hard work and (in retrospect) unhelpful exposure. "Years later, I told Stewart that he'd done a good job on *Skyfox*," he says of his EA producer. "I was thrilled to be a part of Electronic Arts, and feel very lucky to count all of those people as friends all these years later." *

> "I WAS BLOWN AWAY, AND SAW [STAR WARS] MORE THAN 20 TIMES AT THE CINEMA"
> RAY TOBEY

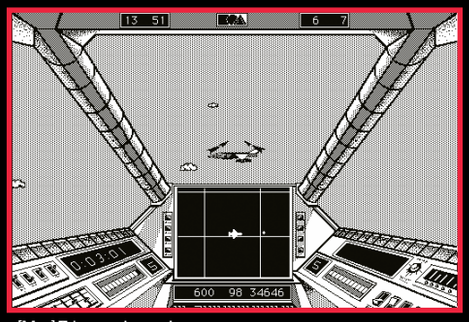
Our thanks to Ray for his time. For more information on *Skyfox* and his subsequent career, visit his blog at bionictoad.com

» [Amiga] The ground battle starts to heat up

» [ZX Spectrum] Another diverse launch screen for ZX Spectrum *Skyfox*.

» [C64] Ray Tobey was not involved in EA's *Skyfox* sequel.

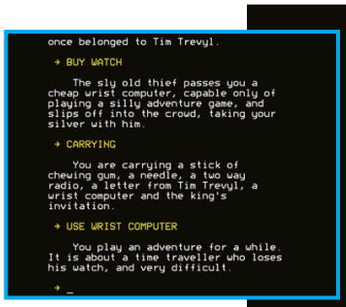
» [ZX Spectrum] While it lacked the colour and speed of the C64 game, Spectrum *Skyfox* was still well received by the dedicated press!



» [Mac] Take no prisoners!

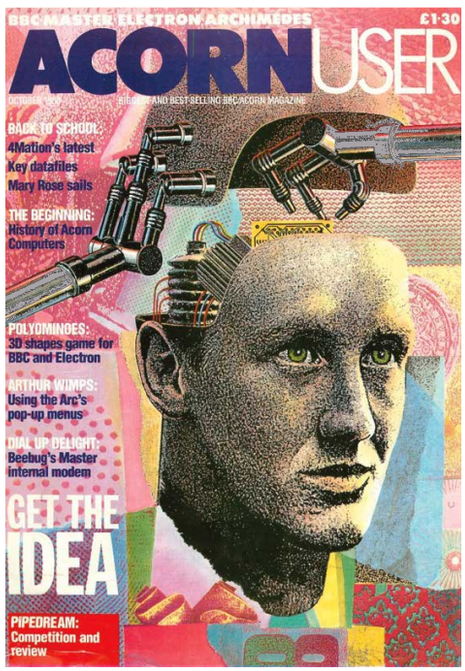
Covermount Corner

The best way to spend your pocket money


once belonged to Tim Trevyl.
→ BUY WATCH
The sly old thief passes you a cheap wrist computer, capable only of playing a silly adventure game, and slips off into the crowd, taking your silver with him.
→ CARRYING
You are carrying a stick of chewing gum, a needle, a two way radio, a letter from Tim Trevyl, a wrist computer and the king's invitation.
→ USE WRIST COMPUTER
You play an adventure for a while. It is about a time traveller who loses his watch, and very difficult.
→

» [BBC Micro] You can even play the game inside the game, sort of.

» [BBC] The Games Disc has a snazzy front end.



COVERTAPES OFTEN LEFT USERS SPOILT FOR CHOICE, BUT THINGS WEREN'T ALWAYS THAT SIMPLE. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN YOU HAD TO TYPE YOUR OWN GAMES IN. FORTUNATELY FOR GAME-HUNGRY BBC OWNERS, THERE WAS AN EASIER WAY, AS WE LEARN IN THIS MONTH'S COVERMOUNT CORNER

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

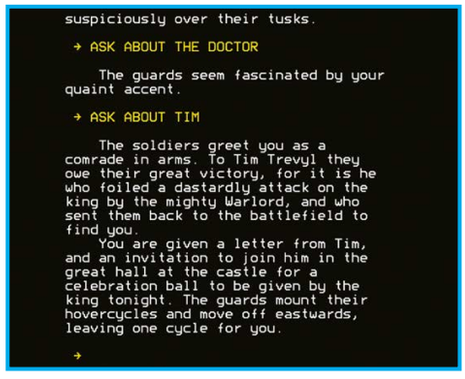
THE WARLORD
An Adventure
by Peter Yoke
and Graham Williams
You are adventuring round space-time with your friend Tim Trevyl. Tim is the youngest member of the time navigator's guild, having recently inherited a time machine from his uncle. The machine is called "the Cubix", since it looks from the outside like an enormous blue cube.
You set out for the planet Quantain, to visit Tim's friend King Varangar who has a spot of trouble on his hands...
PRESS RETURN_

» [BBC Micro] The game's *Doctor Who* origins have been cunningly disguised in this version.

ACORN USER #75

THIS MONTH IN OCTOBER 1988

The BBC Micro had been a staple in British schools for years, but by October 1988 it had been succeeded by the Archimedes. Though Acorn User's focus shifted, the BBC still got coverage. An advanced teletext receiver was eagerly reviewed in the mag. The mag also had code listings to type in, including many games. These weren't always spectacular, but you'd feel you'd earned them, provided you didn't make any typos. If you did, with no internet to turn to, your best option would be to write to the magazine. Fortunately, for £8.95 you could send off for a disk instead.


suspiciously over their tusks.
→ ASK ABOUT THE DOCTOR
The guards seem fascinated by your quaint accent.
→ ASK ABOUT TIM
The soldiers greet you as a comrade in arms. To Tim Trevyl they owe their great victory, for it is he who foiled a dastardly attack on the king by the mighty Warlord, and who sent them back to the battlefield to find you.
You are given a letter from Tim, and an invitation to join him in the great hall at the castle for a celebration ball to be given by the king tonight. The guards mount their hovercycles and move off eastwards, leaving one cycle for you.
→

» [BBC Micro] You start the game alone, but have to track Tim Trevyl down. Fortunately, he's left quite an impression on the locals..

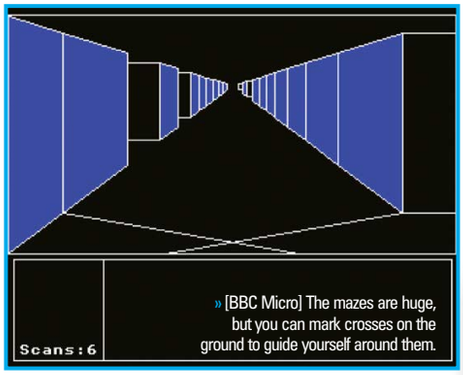
THE MAIN EVENT: THE WARLORD

Text adventure *The Warlord* was originally a *Doctor Who* game, designed by late *Doctor Who* producer Graham Williams, but the *Doctor Who* part was dropped for this *Acorn User* edition, presumably for copyright reasons.

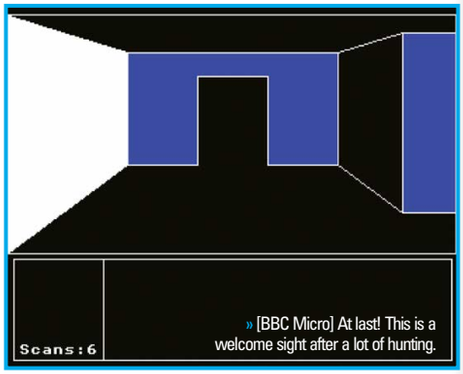
The Doctor is now Tim Trevyl, the youngest member of the time navigator's guild, and the Tardis is the Cubix, an enormous blue cube and definitely not a police box. Beginning on the twin-sunned planet Quantain, the game takes you on quite the journey, with hoverbike rides, mist-veiled battlefields and jaunts in alien taverns. Eventually you'll find your Timey Wimey friend, and travel back in time to Belgium on the eve of the Battle Of Waterloo.

Unusually, this game was too long to be printed in the magazine, so was only available via a mail order disk. Williams' ambitious script meant the game was too big for the memory of a standard BBC Model B, so the game needed considerable technical wizardry, and a cunning multiload system to deliver its 200+ screens to players.

It's a tough game, and though perseverance was in no short supply in the type-in era, the magazine included hints, but in an encrypted form that you had to type in and run in order to access. That added a little friction, and made it easier to resist temptation. Though challenging, *The Warlord* recalls a time when



» [BBC Micro] The mazes are huge, but you can mark crosses on the ground to guide yourself around them.



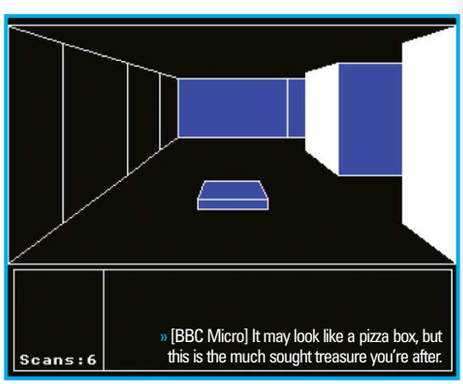
» [BBC Micro] At last! This is a welcome sight after a lot of hunting.

a text adventure could deliver a world deeper and richer than the graphics of the time allowed, and cameos from coder Peter Voke and other members of the *Acorn User* team show the mischievous spirit that might not be apparent on first sight of the magazine's mammoth code listings. Peter Voke would go on to more spiritual things, becoming the abbot of a Zen Buddhist abbey.

PLAY THIS NEXT: 3D MAZE

3D mazes were fascinating displays of early computing power and especially satisfying to type in yourself. This take on the idea, by David Lawrence, was a finger-friendly two-and-a-half pages of BASIC. The randomly generated mazes take a while to generate, but you'll understand why when you start to explore them. The mazes are huge, and largely featureless, so you'll need to make use of your chalk to mark your progress on the floor.

Though sadly monster free, there's treasure to hunt down before you find the exit. It's spartan, but there's something quietly haunting about wandering around the seemingly endless corridors. Perhaps the lack of monsters isn't so bad. ✱



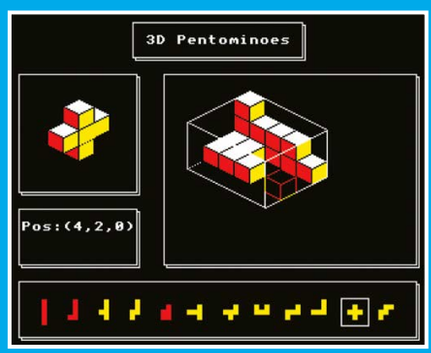
» [BBC Micro] It may look like a pizza box, but this is the much sought treasure you're after.

Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST

WIZALON

■ In David Acton and David Lawrence's game, the evil sorcerer Jefel Droot has imprisoned good wizards Nino Qunty and Brahel Gelm in a dungeon filled with deadly red balloons. Handily, the heroic magicians have summoned a magical see-saw to help pop them. There's nice music, too.



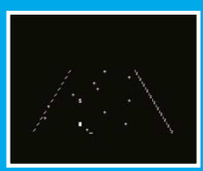
POLYOMINOES

■ David Lawrence and Don Scales created a 3D *Tetris* for aspiring CAD designers. *Polyominoes* has you trying to fill a 3D space with pentominoes, blocks that are one bigger than those in *Tetris*. It's complicated, but a good challenge.

RUN SILENT, RUN DEEP

■ Phil Martin's probably unofficial game of the movie is a tense affair, as you hunt subs and try not to get blown up by mines or torpedoes. You have depth charges and marker buoys, but are quite vulnerable. The tense radar pings keep this exciting to play.

LURCH

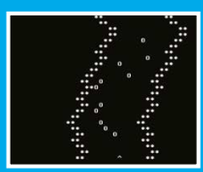


■ *Acorn User* magazine regularly featured one-line games in its Acorn Abuser's Diary section. Stan Froco's *Lurch* is an impressively lo-fi take on David Braben's showpiece Archimedes title *Zarch*, and is similarly hard to control. There's obviously not a lot here, but it's briefly entertaining.

CASTLE OF NIGHTMARES

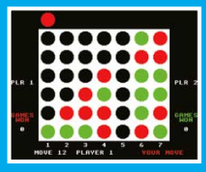
■ Mark de Weger's single-screen platformer also includes a handy editor. There are disappearing floors, conveyor belts and missiles to navigate as you gather the keys to open the exit door. It's not bad for just eight pages of code.

RACE TO VARPON



■ This one-line game, by Oscar Rune, appears to be a simple endless dodger, but as the blurb explains, it is in fact a *War And Peace*-themed horse and cart simulator, and you're devoured by wolves when you crash.

QUADLINE



■ *Quadline* is another game by *Acorn User*'s technical assistant David Acton, who also worked on *Wizalon*. It's a solid Connect Four game for one or two players with multiple difficulty levels and an optional timer.

MASTERMIND

■ Another one-line game, this is a simple take on the old classic, *Mastermind*. Guess the numbers and put them in the correct position to win. Cheekily credited to Orson Fact, an anagram of true author Stan Froco.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

BATMAN

HOT ON THE HEELS OF A 1989 MOVIE THAT BROKE BOX-OFFICE RECORDS, BATMAN SWOOPED ONTO A RANGE OF HOME COMPUTERS TO GREAT ACCLAIM. WITH GRAPHICS THAT NAILED THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE FILM, IT WAS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF A MOVIE TIE-IN DONE RIGHT

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

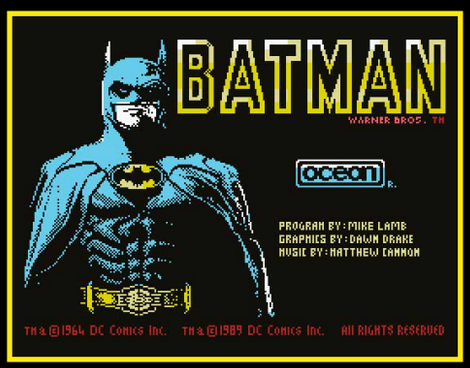
IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** OCEAN SOFTWARE
- **DEVELOPER:** OCEAN SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1989
- **GENRE:** ACTION

By the end of the Eighties there was a justified wariness about games based on films. Some games of this kind had fared admirably, including *Ghostbusters* by David Crane and the atmospheric *Aliens: The Computer Game*, which suitably spooked home-computer users. And yet many film tie-ins had fallen short, including the famously disastrous *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* for the Atari 2600 and the lacklustre *Jaws* for the NES. Fortunately, Ocean Software was in the Batmobile's driving seat for the game adaptation of Tim Burton's 1989 box-office smash. Having just successfully converted Data East's excellent *RoboCop* arcade hit to home computers (which Data East weirdly licensed from Ocean), and with titles such as *Rambo* under its belt, the company had proven its worth when it came to handling Hollywood IP. On the release of *Batman*, which is also sometimes known as *Batman: The Movie*, it was declared to be an "outstanding film licence" in *Amstrad Action*, while *CVG* went as far as reporting it to be "definitely the best film tie-in yet".

Perhaps the most immediately striking aspect of the game is how closely it matches the dark, brooding style of its silver screen source material. Moody pixel art loading screens, particularly on the Amiga version, depict characters from the film deftly, while the five levels tick many of the boxes on our wish list for role-playing the Caped Crusader, from lobbing a Batarang to driving the Batmobile. Your adventure begins and finishes with

» [Amiga] Art screens like this one depict quotes and characters from the movie in glorious detail.


BATMAN
WARNER BROS. TM
ocean
PROGRAM BY: MIKE LAMB
GRAPHICS BY: DAWN DRAKE
MUSIC BY: MATTHEW CANNON
TM & ©1964 DC Comics Inc. TM & ©1989 DC Comics Inc. All RIGHTS RESERVED

» [MSX] Even on the MSX, the art team managed to produce lovely pixel art.

» [Amiga] There's stealthy satisfaction to be had in shimmying up behind enemies using your Bat Rope.

> "PERHAPS THE MOST IMMEDIATELY STRIKING ASPECT OF THE GAME IS HOW CLOSELY IT MATCHES THE DARK, BROODING STYLE OF ITS SILVER SCREEN SOURCE MATERIAL"

side-scrolling action platforming stages, which take place within the Axis Chemical Plant and Gotham Cathedral respectively. Flinging yourself between platforms using your Bat Rope in these segments is a joy, although the steep difficulty curve is intense at the start of the game (and arguably throughout it). Health-preservation is particularly paramount as you clamber around the stark industrial setting of the chemical plant.

Should you persevere and make it to the second stage, you'll be treated to a high-speed driving challenge set on the streets of Gotham, while the third level does something completely different by setting you a cryptic puzzle to solve on a vaguely *Tetris*-style grid, with just one minute on the timer. The fourth level puts you in control of the Batwing, soaring through the streets of Gotham attempting to mow down carnival balloons that the Joker has filled with ▶

PACK ATTACK

HOW THE BATMAN PACK PROPELLED AMIGA SALES

■ In his book *Commodore: The Inside Story*, former Commodore managing director David Pleasance recalls the discussions with Ocean in which he orchestrated the Batman Pack. Combining an Amiga 500 with *Batman*, Deluxe Paint II, *F/A-18 Interceptor* and *The NewZealand Story*, the pack promoted the Amiga as a versatile games machine with family wide appeal. It retailed at £399.

By David's account, Ocean had paid $1 million for the *Batman* licence, and it was initially hesitant about being involved in an arrangement that might affect direct game sales. Eventually though a deal was struck. "The first ever pack was born," David writes. "From then on we sold dreams." By Christmas of 1989, Commodore had reportedly sold 186,000 Batman Packs. There was even a TV advert for the bundle voiced by Stephen Fry. It was the first of many successful Amiga bundles and also helped to secure Ocean's fortunes.

» The Caped Crusader helped sell a lot of Amiga 500s. Image credit: Vasilis Psomiadis

» [Amiga] Speeding through the streets of Gotham in the Batmobile is a treat.

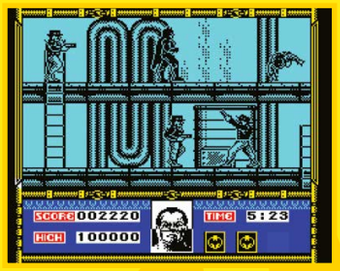
CONVERSION CAPERS

AMIGA

■ With many Amiga gamers introduced to *Batman* through the Batman Pack, it quickly became one of the most-widely owned games on the platform. There's something almost coin-op-like about the fast loading times, smooth scrolling and pulsating music that made this a really exciting version.

ATARI ST

■ ST owners got something very close to the Amiga version, just with slightly weaker sound and less smooth scrolling if you look carefully. Interestingly, there are some differences in the still artwork screens that appear between levels, including the screen shown here that doesn't feature in the Amiga game.



ZX SPECTRUM

■ Although Ocean stripped back the graphics of the 16-bit versions, the Spectrum game feels great to play. Despite its monochrome colour palette, the sprites and backgrounds are clearly defined, and the sound is decent too. It's no wonder *Crash* magazine readers voted it Game Of The Year.

MSX

■ While MSX machines were extremely big in Japan they were less popular in the West, so we doubt too many of you will have played this version back in the day. As you might expect, It's very similar to the Spectrum version of the game, but features paler visuals and simplified sound.

poisonous gas. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no boss fights to contend with at any point. The closest you'll get is hitting Jack Napier into a vat of acid at the end of level one, thus creating the Joker, and then knocking said villain off his helicopter ladder at the very end. Both of these encounters are one-hit kills rather than dramatic boss battles. There are also no extra weapons, power-ups or health pick-ups to be found throughout the whole experience, bucking some typical action game tropes of the time. Despite that, the levels dish out novelty in other ways. The sheer variety of the levels and the ways in which they match up with scenes from the film make the action feel diverse and compelling.

Among the biggest differences between the 8-bit and 16-bit versions concerns the graphics during the driving and flying levels. On the Commodore 64, Spectrum and Amstrad CPC, these sequences have a side-on perspective that works well enough given the hardware constraints. But Amiga, Atari ST and DOS gamers are treated to a behind-the-vehicle view of a detailed city skyline and scenes of 3D light animation that felt particularly fast-paced and impressive at the time of release. This was partly the result of Ocean smartly setting artist Bill Harbison and programmer John O'Brien the task of using their driving game knowledge from the Spectrum conversion of *Chase HQ*, and applying it to putting players in control of the Batmobile and Batwing. *Zzap! Amiga* was particularly bowled over by this part of the game, reporting as part of its 97% rated review that, "The first level is a better challenge, but the Batmobile section – well, words fail me – the 3D effect has more speed and detail than I thought possible." As for developers involved in other parts of the game, Bill credits lead programmer Michael Lamb, who worked across every conversion, and artist Dawn Drake, for being integral to the side-scrolling levels that bookend the experience.

» [Amiga] In an interesting change of pace, the third stage revolves around a cryptic logic puzzle.

Memorable music and audio design also lifted the game above many others of the time. On the title screen of the 16-bit versions you'll hear the iconic sampled speech of, "What are you?" followed by, "I'm Batman," recognisable directly from the film, which suggested that Ocean must have had some level of inside access before the cinematic release. On the other hand, Bill Harbison tells us he had to track down a toy Batmobile in order to know how he should draw it. He also recalls the team being disappointed not to be

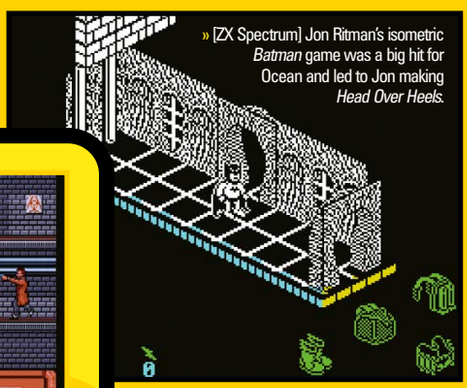
MORE CAPED CRUSADES

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OTHER EIGHTIES BATMAN GAMES

■ The first *Batman* game released by Ocean, and in fact the first videogame outing for the Dark Knight full stop, was an 8-bit isometric adventure launched in 1986. Like the 1989 game, it was also called simply *Batman*. Made by Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond, it was a forerunner to their classic creation *Head Over Heels* which came just a year later.

Another notable *Batman* game of the era was *Batman: The Caped Crusader* (above), published by Ocean in 1988 but developed by Special FX. With the gameplay framed in pop-out panels with speech bubbles and colourful graphics, it was very much aligned to the comic-book legacy of the Caped Crusader rather than his on-screen escapades.

In December 1989, Sunsoft released *Batman: The Video Game* for the NES in Japan, with Western releases coming soon after. Another tie-in with the film, its side-scrolling platform action was well reviewed.


» [ZX Spectrum] Jon Ritman's isometric *Batman* game was a big hit for Ocean and led to Jon making *Head Over Heels*.

HOW DOES THE DARK KNIGHT FARE ACROSS THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT VERSIONS?

C64

■ With bright colours and plenty of fast action, the Commodore 64 version of *Batman* is certainly worth checking out. Unlike the other versions, the difficulty level feels slightly more forgiving. Like other 8-bit versions, its driving and flying levels are simpler side-on affairs instead of the striking 16-bit showcases.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ Chunky-looking graphics don't stop the Amstrad CPC game from being a lot of fun to play. It still contains all the recognisable imagery from the film fans had hoped for. The backgrounds are more detailed than the C64 version in places and everything plays at a nippy speed. It's another solid 8-bit conversion.

PC (DOS)

■ Released a year after the other versions of the game, *Batman* on the PC offers graphical polish and smooth enough action, but its darker colours tone down the atmosphere somewhat. Crucially, the lack of in-game music and very basic sound effects render it a downgrade from the other 16-bit versions.

"AMONG THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT VERSIONS CONCERNS THE GRAPHICS DURING THE DRIVING AND FLYING LEVELS"

» [Amiga] In the Batwing stage you'll mow down carnival balloons filled with poisonous gas.

given a sneak preview of the film, which arrived in cinemas in June 1989 in the US, and in August the same year in the UK, with the game following swiftly after in September. It was a perfectly timed launch and a huge success for Ocean, especially on the Amiga where the Batman Pack hardware and software bundle boosted sales of the Amiga 500 to new heights. There was plenty of love for the game on other platforms too. *ST Format* observed that, "Principally because of the massive variation between levels, there's a strong incitement to progress further and further into the game, ably assisted by some superb graphics." *Commodore Format* meanwhile seemed to be lost for adequate adjectives about the Commodore 64 version, telling its readers, "This is great stuff. The graphics are spinky, sprites are spanky and gameplay is sponky."

Undeniably, much like the Caped Crusader himself, the game is rock hard. This did temper the reaction of some critics. There are no passwords, no save option, and three lives to see you through the whole thing. The frustrations of trying and failing to fling your Batmobile around corners using your grappling hook, or guessing the right solutions to the logic puzzle level, can be very real. The game manual has some genuinely sage advice for the first and final levels, at least, "Master control of the Bat Rope. Work out a quick route to the end. Shoot on sight." That guidance about alternative routes in particular is worth heeding, as there are a few places where choosing one path over another will get you to the exit much quicker. If all else fails, some readers who had the game for the Amiga might remember that typing 'jammmmm' on the title screen grants you infinite lives and the ability to skip levels with F10.

Despite the steep challenge it lays down, the combination of awesome audio tracks, detailed graphics, smart level design and a close likeness to the film coalesced into something very special that retains a real charm today. *Batman* marked an important point in the history of Ocean Software, and it set a high bar for other videogame film licences that followed. ★

AMIGA SUPERHEROES

FURTHER SUPERHERO SHENANIGANS WORTH TRYING

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

■ Set in a film studio with sets based on movie genres, this enjoyable adventure pits you as a tiny sprite traversing multiple screens whilst slinging your web and solving simple puzzles. It's an unusual delight with lots of character and loads of pleasant surprises.

SUPERHERO

■ This promising Psygnosis game was playable as a *One Amiga* coverdisk demo, combining platform and beat-'em-up elements. Sadly it was never released, reportedly due to an office police raid that damaged computer equipment. Check out the indieretronews.com for the full story.

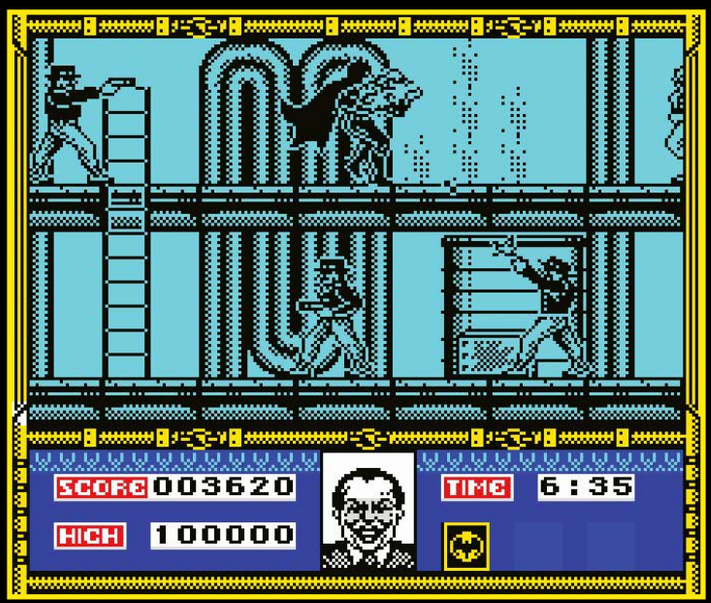
TEENAGE MUTANT HERO TURTLES

■ A fun conversion of the NES Turtles romp, this was a better option for Amiga owners than *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles: The Coin-Op*, which raised hopes of arcade action with its title but then dashed them with sluggish performance.

SUPERFROG

■ Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it a…frog? While he might be a tad different from the Marvel and DC league of superhero, Team17's Superfrog has a special place in the hearts of Amiga fans for his fast-paced platform antics.

"UNDENIABLY, MUCH LIKE THE CAPED CRUSADER HIMSELF, THE GAME IS ROCK HARD"



» [ZX Spectrum] It's easy to get overwhelmed by baddies bombarding you from all angles on the first level.

» [C64] You're about to knock Jack Napier into a vat of acid, inadvertently creating the Joker.

ARTIST Q&A

BILL HARBISON ON BRINGING THE BATMOBILE TO HOME COMPUTERS

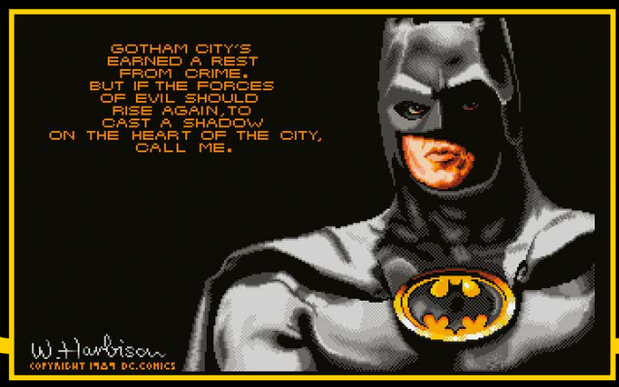
What led up to you working on *Batman*?
I'd just finished [the Spectrum version of] *Chase HQ*. While I was working on that I was given an Atari ST to work on. Going from two colours to 16 colours was quite interesting! So I was practising doing 16-colour graphics in my spare time while I was waiting for whatever project I was going to be doing next. I found out from [Ocean Boss] Gary Bracey that we're basically doing *Chase HQ* again, but with higher-resolution graphics, more colours… and the Batmobile. Me and John O'Brien had been working together on driving games. He'd done the engine for *Chase HQ* and rewritten it for the Atari ST and Amiga. I think Gary just thought, right well they did a decent enough job, we'll keep them together and put them on *Batman*.

Which graphics did you work on?
My contribution was the Batmobile scenes, including the objects on the road and in the background. Those were also used in the Batwing scenes, which John Palmer did the Batwing animation for. Anything like cars coming in and out of the distance and buildings, that's what I did. And the animation for the Batmobile. With the cars going into the distance, we didn't have any scaling software, so we had to draw each frame and decide at which point we needed to pop sprites into the next size up like it was going seamlessly into the distance.

We know you also created the art of *Batman* on the ending screen, as your signature is on it.
Yeah, there were comments going around the artists saying, "Well we don't have a contract at Ocean. They don't own any of your work, so if you sign your work it belongs to you." That's why everybody signed their images.

"THE MAIN CHALLENGE WAS THAT WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE BATMOBILE LOOKED LIKE"
BILL HARBISON

Were there any big challenges that you had to tackle?
The main challenge was that we didn't know what the Batmobile looked like. We'd only seen an image of a bit of the side. We had no idea about the front. It was only a couple of weeks before the deadline, and I was in a comic-book shop in Manchester where I used to go with some of the lads for a look around. And there was this [holds up a toy Batmobile] which I took straight to the counter. I went straight back to the office and started drawing it.



Marathon

IT'S NOT A SPRINT

» RETROREVIVAL

» APPLE MAC » 1994 » BUNGIE

When I first started working on magazines in 2000, the highlight of the day was lunchtime interdepartmental deathmatches. People from editorial, advertising and marketing would avoid fresh air and sustenance, and instead play *Quake III Arena* over the office network. This was my first experience of LAN gaming and it was superb – and quite shouty. The racket must have delighted those in the art department, who couldn't join in as they all used Apple Macs. I'm not sure of the model, but they were beige and enormous and only seemed to run publishing and design software. Us PC users thought the Macs were rubbish, with their weird OS and one-button mice.

Anyway, at some point we moved on to playing *Counter-Strike*, and the volume level went up another notch. Undeterred, the Mac users started their own little LAN party, playing *Marathon*. I'd never heard of the game before, and initially dismissed it as a *Doom* clone for the Mac, similar to how there was *Gloom* for the Amiga. And watching them play a classic deathmatch didn't really change my opinion. It was fun, but archaic compared to what we were playing on our PCs.

It was a few years later, when I was reading an article about Mac gaming, that I discovered the significance of the game. It was one of the first games to feature the FPS standard of 'free look', allowing you to look around using mouse control. It also had a rich plot which was relayed via a series of computer terminals you accessed as you progressed through the game. Obviously, the key fact is that it was developed by Bungie, and it just happened to be the predecessor to the Xbox launch title – and one of the greatest games of all time – *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Nods to *Marathon* are dotted throughout *Halo* (the game's logo even incorporates *Marathon*'s logo), but if you play both games, you can sense the lineage in the weapons, design choices and story elements. And this continues forward into Bungie's brand-new *Marathon*, which was released to critical acclaim in March this year (check out my review on page 92 of this very issue). Those Mac users in the art department were clearly onto something. ✱

Brain Bug was a group of Danish friends who started working together out of their love for the Commodore and Amiga. This is how a little doll took them to Germany and to a long career in gaming

WORDS BY DAMIANO GERLI

» Bjørn Næsby Nielsen, Samuel S Nova, Søren, Jørgen Trolle Ørberg, and Ole Mogensen (seated) with the Lollypop doll on his shoulders.

» Brain Bug's offices in Aarhus, on the table there is a Pegasus dev kit (Mega Drive/Genesis) given by Factor 5.

» The original Lollypop doll, knitted by Jørgen's mother, overseeing the team's work.

In the Nineties, Denmark wasn't a household name in gaming, but with an industry in its infancy, many gamers were already passionate about home computers. Ole Mogensen was one of them, as he began working at the developer and publisher Interactivision. After first collaborating with the company on a few Commodore 64 games, Ole was hired. "I was barely 20 years old, my parents kept telling me to get a 'real job', but it was my passion, and eventually they supported me."

While he started as a programmer, he gradually moved into more of a producer role. One of the first games he worked on was *Cover Girl Strip Poker*, on which he remembers, "A couple of us 20-year-old nerds went to Copenhagen to attend a sex fair to demonstrate the game, and at one point, Trine Michelsen – one of the girls from the game – came over and put her arms around us. We just stood there blushing, thinking, "What are we doing here?" It was awkward, but honestly, great fun."

> "My parents kept telling me to get a 'real job', but it was my passion, and eventually, they supported me"
> **Ole Mogensen**

After a few years at Interactivision, Ole Mogensen and Søren Raadved Lund began putting together what would become Brain Bug, including Jesper Olsen and Samuel S Nova. Its first game came from Ole, "As a huge fan of *The Great Giana Sisters* and *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, I wanted to make a 2D side-scrolling platformer in the same spirit. The idea was that Lollypop, a doll struck by lightning, would come back to life, hungry for sweets. We wrote a 20-page design document, and our first level was Spookville, set in a ghost town with a cemetery and a huge Mama Ghost as the end boss. We just wanted to make something that stood out."

Another piece to the story of *Lollypop* came from the Commodore 64 music group, Vibrants. Fellow Danes, with Ole's brother Thomas, they were a small group of friends making music with the classic SID chip. One of the members was Jens-Christian Huus, who remembers getting into the C64 at a later age than most, saying, "I got a C64 at 18 years old, and got into the scene three years later through buy/sell ads in magazines, making a few cracker intros. By 1992, I had started creating AdLib players to make sound effects for a few Danish games. AdLib was very different from the SID chip and it came with its own limitations, like very flaccid drum sounds."

Once the *Lollypop* demo was finished, it was time to find a suitable publisher. Ole remembers getting only vaguely positive replies but nothing substantial until Rainbow Arts wrote back. The German publisher seemed a perfect fit, having published games such as *The Great Giana Sisters* and *Turrican*, as project manager Thomas Brockhage remembers. "The demo felt pretty much like a finished game. It had impressive graphics for the PC at the time, a great soundtrack and sensible mechanics. It was just a matter of polishing it up and getting it ready for release."

After signing the publishing contract, Brain Bug actually became a company with some humble offices in Aarhus, Denmark, with self-made tables. "It was our dream to be paid to work on our own game, says Ole. "Rainbow Arts was keen on a PC version, as the Amiga market was on a decline. In the end, the entire project took almost two years." The team also sneaked a little reference to *The Great Giana Sisters*, with a sign of Giana's tomb. Thomas ▶

» [PC] The Spookville level includes even a small church that you'll have to visit. Very cosy!

» [PC] Every level has many rooms that will have to be explored to get to the final boss, each with its own theme song.

» [PC] Mama Ghost is a tough cookie, especially because she launches little red ghosts at you. Be quick on your feet!

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

WHAT BECAME OF THE MINDS BEHIND BRAIN BUG?

OLE MOGENSEN

Since the Brain Bug days, Ole has stayed in the games industry, working across genres, platforms, and companies with teams around the world. Along with games on the PlayStation and Game Boy Color, he has also contributed to later ones such as *Hitman* and *Exoborne*. In 2023 he was also the narrative director for *Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora*.

THOMAS BROCKHAGE

Thomas has worked on many other games for Rainbow Arts, later to become Softgold, such as being the executive producer for games such as *Enclave*. Later, he also worked on retro games up until a few years ago, collaborating with Data East among others. Today he works on business software.

JENS-CHRISTIAN HUUS

After switching from the Commodore 64 to PC and developing his own DOS music editors, Jens-Christian left composing altogether by the end of the Nineties. Since 2020, he has been working at the Danish tax administration as a software tester. He still loves games, and he keeps writing about games on his blog Chordian.net In 2017 he also returned to composing on the C64.

» [AMIGA] The Amiga version of *Lollypop* looks almost the same, just with less colours and a bit more grainy.

» [PC] For all intents and purposes, *Super Star Wars* on the PC feels like a well-made remaster of the SNES title.

» [PC] *Earthworm Jim* controls pretty well and it is definitely a near-perfect PC port. Graphically it is immaculate.

▶ mentions "I was aware of it, but I'm fairly sure none of the higher-ups were as that could have caused some issues, since we were still trying to avoid Nintendo's attention. Still, it was a small wink-wink, I liked it."

The Rainbow Arts producer remembers Brain Bug's game fondly, "I was about 25 and with them being two years younger, it felt like being among friends. It was a fun project to work on but there were some choices that, now, I would definitely have corrected." Thomas mentions how the movement of Lollypop is not fluid, but slightly more robotic, like a doll would move. The difficulty was also pretty high, Thomas mentions how all testers were already platformer veterans. "How can you judge the difficulty of a game if you are good at it?" he laughs.

The Amiga version came out on five floppy disks, which Rainbow Arts complained about because of manufacturing costs. Was *Lollypop* successful? No, as Ole mentions, "There didn't seem to be a lot of effort in the marketing, people seemed to mainly discover it only in the last few years after it was included on the Amiga Mini." Thomas mentions that the game sold OK in Germany, but didn't seem to do much elsewhere. "I thought we could take advantage of the 2D platformers on the PC niche, instead of competing in saturated markets like real-time strategy or first-person shooters."

Ole also mentions that *Lollypop* wasn't successful financially, saying, "We didn't earn much money at the beginning but that didn't matter, it was all about making what we were passionate about. For our first game? I think it came out pretty nice." Still, everybody seemed to agree on one thing: the amazing soundtrack, made by Drax (Thomas Laurits Vedel Mogensen) and Metal (Torben Hansen) of the Vibrants group. For the PC it was converted by Jens-Christian who also created the game's sound effects. It is often mentioned as one

GAMES TO DISCOVER
TITLES OLE AND HIS TEAM WORKED ON

COVER GIRL STRIP POKER
DOS, 1991
■ One of the first games produced by Ole is a classic strip poker game with scanned-in pictures of girls.

LOLLYPOP
DOS, 1994
■ The one game released by Brain Bug showed a team with much promise. Perhaps one day we'll see a sequel…?

SUPER STAR WARS
DOS, 1995
■ The unreleased PC conversion of the LucasArts SNES classic plays as good as the original.

EARTHWORM JIM 1+2: THE WHOLE CAN OF WORMS
DOS, 1995
■ This is a great way to experience the games. Shame about that missing level.

TURRICAN II
DOS, 1995
■ The last *Turrican II* port was released four years after the original with Brain Bug redrawing the graphics to 256 colours.

of the best-sounding PC soundtracks of the time, but that was no easy task to create. "The first real challenge was getting the hard-to-get documentation for coding AdLib," Jens mentions. "After a long search I finally found a very expensive book in a small computer shop in northern Denmark." But Jens-Christian wasn't enthusiastic about moving from the Commodore 64 to PC. "All the commotion and interest in what I was doing on the C64 was almost nonexistent there. It felt like I had left a cool party and joined another where no one knew me or wanted to engage with me."

> "All the commotion and interest in what I was doing on the C64 was almost nonexistant there. It felt like I had left a cool party and joined another where no one knew me or wanted to engage with me"
> **Jens Christian-Huus**

» [PC] *Super Star Wars* on PC plays as well as on the Super Nintendo, difficulty included…

» [SNES] The *DKC*-like graphics in *Rendering Ranger* suit the SNES but it would have been nice to see the original pixel art too.

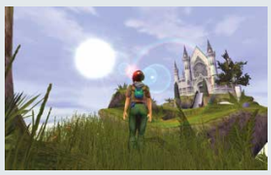
In 1995 the publisher decided to purchase Brain Bug, and the sale meant moving the team over to Germany. Ole remembers the entire team of "young nerds" walking into Rainbow Arts' factory and just being in awe, as it was one of the biggest European publishers at the time. "We were sort of the incubation team at Rainbow Arts, trying out ideas so they could decide what worked. I spent time programming a puzzle game called *The Firefighters* for the Amiga, which never ended up being released, just one of many projects we explored."

Brain Bug continued working on several other projects under Rainbow Arts' umbrella, such as the PC port of the *Earthworm Jim* games. But, because of Shiny's deal with Activision, the original developers couldn't provide the source data. Brain Bug was forced to copy everything from scratch, and in a very short time. "We were provided graphical assets and map data, but not much other than that, sometimes it happened in these types of deals," remembers Thomas.

RENDERING RANGER R2
SUPER NINTENDO, 1995
■ Manfred Trenz was firing on all cylinders for this 16-bit multi-directional shooter. Part of Brain Bug worked on the *DKC*-inspired graphics.

THE ELDER SCROLLS: DAGGERFALL
PC, 1996
■ Part of the Brain Bug team would move on to Bethesda and work on heavy hitters such as the classic *Daggerfall*.

X: BEYOND THE FRONTIER
PC, 1999
■ Ole was the producer of many titles of the *X* series, the *Elite*-inspired space sim, being involved especially in the first one.



ZANZARAH: THE HIDDEN PORTAL
PC, 2001
■ This attempt to produce a *Pokémon*-like adventure on PC has gone on to become a small cult classic.

CULTURES
PC, 2000
■ Ole was involved as a producer in this *Settlers*-inspired effort that launched a brief series of games.

» [PC] The DOS version of *Turrican II* is probably the best looking out of the bunch, and plays well too.

The time was so short that the second level from *Earthworm Jim 2* ended up being cut. "Replicating its physics was too difficult to do from scratch and in that short time," mentions Ole. Considering this port is now the official one available on Steam, Lorenzen's Soil has become a little bit of a lost media today.

Brain Bug also worked on the unreleased PC port of *Super Star Wars*, as we mentioned in issue 252. The original Super Nintendo game had come out in 1992 and Rainbow Arts, who had been working with LucasArts localising its games for Germany, wanted to show it could make an impressive PC port. Not only did Brain Bug work on recreating all the original SNES effects, such as the Mode 7 zoom effect while improving graphics to 256 colours, but Rainbow Arts added a CD soundtrack and CG cutscenes. "They were really well done, I thought we were slightly pushing the envelope for 1995," adds Thomas. But, with the port completed and everything almost ready to ship, LucasArts put a stop to the project.

"With LucasArts moving to much more sophisticated *Star Wars* games, such as *Rebel Assault* and *X-Wing*, I think publishing a PC port of a three-year-old SNES game didn't appeal to them," continues Thomas. "They didn't think it would be commercially viable for the US market." Still, the PC port would be released on 'warez' compilations in 1996.

Brain Bug also improved the graphics for the PC port of *Turrican II*, which Thomas mentions as one of the longest projects the team worked on. "We were sent a demo by a young genius programmer, back in 1992. We were interested to see what he could do, so we provided some source code. Years later he finished it, but then negotiations with his dad manager took a while. It came out so late after the original release that we felt we had to

DNA OF BRAIN BUG

THE INGREDIENTS TO THE GAMES

BEAUTIFUL PIXEL ART

■ Brain Bug was definitely at the top of its game regarding 2D graphics, shown not only in the beautiful elements and fluid animations of *Lollypop* but also in its other titles. In *Super Star Wars* for PC, every element is rendered to perfection.

A RARE 'RETRO' SOUNDTRACK

■ In *Lollypop*, the most well-known element is, naturally, the soundtrack. Vibrants brought the original Commodore 64 SID vibe to a PC game, something that very few other games of the time really had, along with using the AdLib in a never-really heard before way.

TOUGH AS NAILS DIFFICULTY

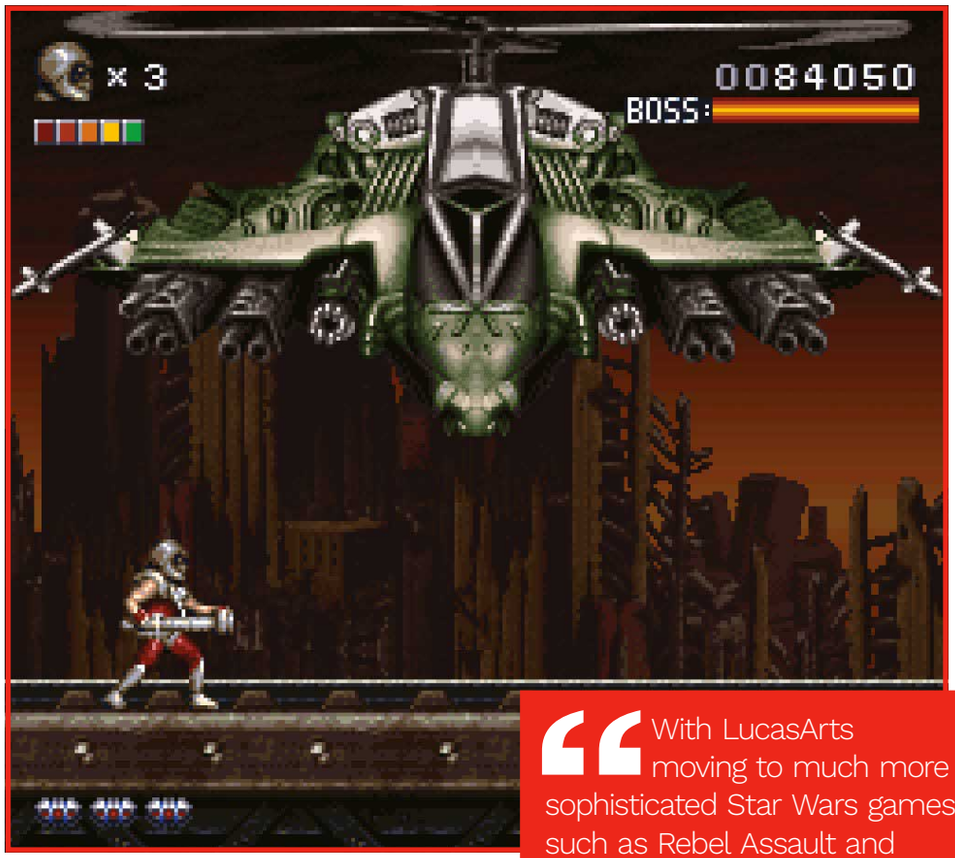
■ Anybody who has ever played *Lollypop*, has definitely walked away with a few broken bones. The difficulty is quite legendary as everything in the game seems out to kill the poor innocent doll. Nobody will blame you if you decide to play it with infinite lives.

» [PC] The rainy forest ramps up the difficulty right away, as the enemies hide in the grass ready to jump.

upgrade the graphics to 256 colours." Part of the Brain Bug team also worked on Manfred Trenz's *Targa*, a game that Rainbow Arts also wanted to update graphically. Ole remembers, "Following the success of *Donkey Kong Country*, we were asked to redo Manfred's 2D art using pre-rendered graphics produced on high-end SGI workstations. A bit overkill, in hindsight! I liked the original graphics better." The game would only come out in Japan as *Rendering Ranger: R2* for the Super Famicom. Trenz was told by the publisher that "nobody in the US or EU was interested".

After 1995, the group started to break up a bit, some returned home, while others moved on to new companies around the world. "Søren and I continued working together on several titles, such as *Zanzarah* and *X: Beyond The Frontier*," says Ole. "In the end, I decided to stay in Germany for 15 years, even though I was the one originally less enthusiastic about moving there!"

While officially Brain Bug only really released one game, its talent shone brightly in the space of a few years, and later in companies such as Bethesda, THQ and Warner Bros. In time, *Lollypop* has become a bit of a cult classic, exemplifying the classic Nordic flare for 2D platformers and its legendary difficulty. It is luckily now available on Steam and Gog for all players to experience the little dream these young Danes wanted to pursue. ✱



» [SNES] The first boss in *Rendering Ranger R2* is pretty easy, just move along with it and keep shooting.

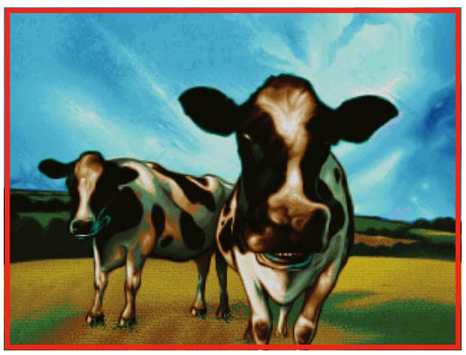
> "With LucasArts moving to much more sophisticated Star Wars games, such as Rebel Assault and X-Wing, I think publishing a PC port of a three-year-old SNES game didn't appeal to them"
> **Thomas Brockhage**

SOLID PORTS AND CONVERSIONS

■ While Brain Bug didn't have the opportunity to work on a lot of conversions, its work seems immaculate. Not only does *Super Star Wars* play beautifully, but the DOS version of *Earthworm Jim 1* and *2* shines as well.

THE "NORDIC" TOUCH

■ With *Lollypop*, Ole and the others also brought a game that not only had the European touch, for its *Giana Sisters* inspiration, but also a bit of the Nordics. Little horror elements, snowy castles, plus a special thank you to *Monty Python* for "making Danish TV bearable to watch".



» [PC] The end cows in *Earthworm Jim 2* have never looked so rich with detail. There are also very clear vocal samples!

retro GAMER's FAVOURITE...

SNES ARCADE CONVERSIONS

SEGA MAY HAVE HAD AN ENTIRE ARCADE DIVISION TO RELY ON FOR ITS MEGA DRIVE, BUT THAT DIDN'T MEAN PLENTY OF GREAT CONVERSIONS DIDN'T HIT THE SNES. HOW MANY OF THE FOLLOWING BANGERS DID YOU GET TO PLAY?

Words by Darran Jones

SUPER STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 2

All of Capcom's *Street Fighter* conversions on the SNES are impressive and worth playing, but *Alpha 2* is on another level entirely. Yes it's missing certain elements found in the arcade game, but this is a truly astonishing conversion that proves just what the Super Nintendo was capable of in skilled hands. Little wonder it's now in high demand.

UN SQUADRON

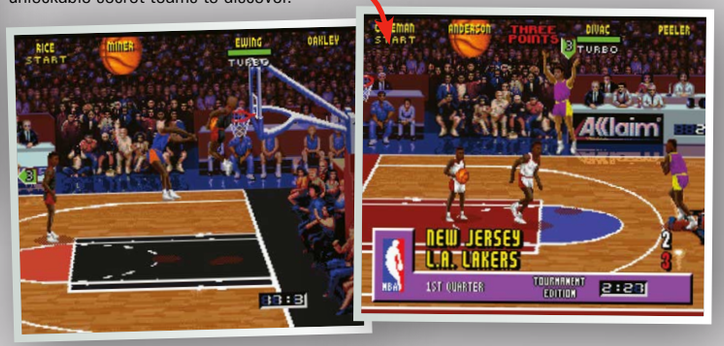
Capcom's SNES conversion blew away the other versions of the time and it remains one of the console's best shmups. Capcom's game is also significantly improved over the arcade original thanks to a new mission structure, an enhanced shop system and various other extras. It's arguably the best arcade shmup conversion you'll find on the system.

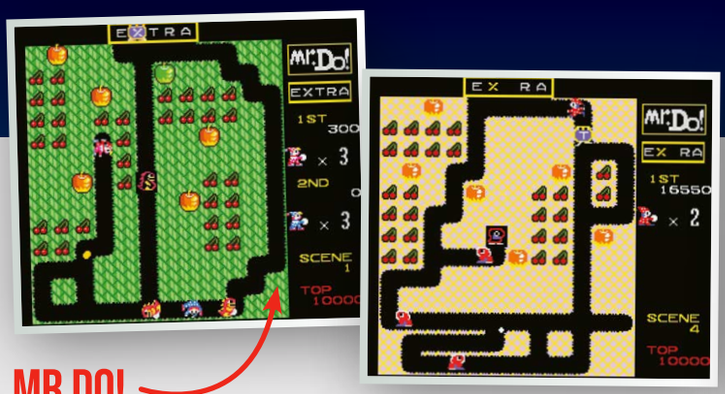
MORTAL KOMBAT II

The original SNES *Mortal Kombat* was a poor alternative to its Mega Drive peer due to a distinct lack of blood, but this sequel is a vast improvement. The Mega Drive version certainly feels a little nippier, but this has far better visuals, audio and presentation and still feels very polished to play. It even has a secret intro too.

NBA JAM: TOURNAMENT EDITION

It's always nice to get a fast-paced sports game in a list like this and they don't come more hectic than *NBA Jam*. This *Tournament Edition* is a significant improvement over the original thanks to numerous gameplay enhancements that make the experience feel even more over the top than before. There's also a new Juice mode and lots of unlockable secret teams to discover.



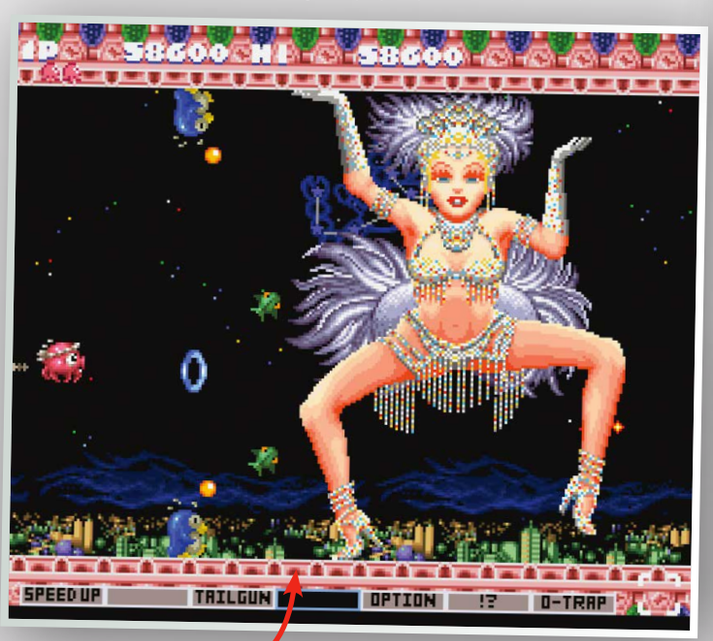


MR DO!

■ Universal's game was extremely long in the tooth by the time it hit the SNES, but that just makes for a surprisingly accurate conversion. The important thing is that it's still a brilliant game with all the complexities of the arcade's scoring system being carried over. In a nice touch, it adds an entertaining two-player option with spruced up visuals.

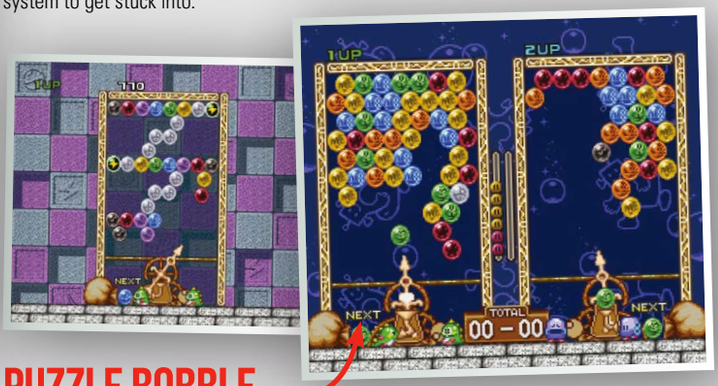
KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND

■ Yes, Capcom's *Final Fight* is on the SNES, but that version is forever hobbled by not catering for two players so it hasn't made the cut. What does make the list is Capcom's excellent take on the legend of King Arthur. It may take huge liberties with the licence, but it's a dynamic brawler with gorgeous sprite work and a surprisingly meaty scoring system to get stuck into.



PARODIUS

■ Konami's wacky cute-'em-up is a great arcade conversion and perfect proof that Nintendo's console could deliver intense shooting experiences. You won't find any extras over the arcade game, but it's extremely accurate with some memorable bosses and superb music (which we actually prefer over the later 32-bit versions).



PUZZLE BOBBLE

■ There are no bells, thrills or even whistles on this SNES conversion. In fact, it's the most basic game on this list in terms of extras, but when it comes to competitive multiplayer action few other games can beat it. While the computer AI is no slouch, *Puzzle Bobble* really comes into its own when you play against a mate.

SUPER OFF-ROAD

■ There's a lot to love about *Super Off-Road*. The dinky trucks are brilliantly animated and look great as they jostle around the well-designed courses, and it boasts some extremely funky music as well. Best of all, you can bork the game by loading up on boosts, so you can just zip around the later tracks at wondrously silly speeds.

JOE & MAC: CAVEMAN NINJA

■ If you're looking for a solid arcade platformer we heartily recommend this prehistoric romp. It features a new *Mario*-style overworld map, significantly expands the arcade game's stages and even features new bonus scenes that are unlocked by finding keys. It's a very accurate conversion and the two-player mode is the icing on the cake.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

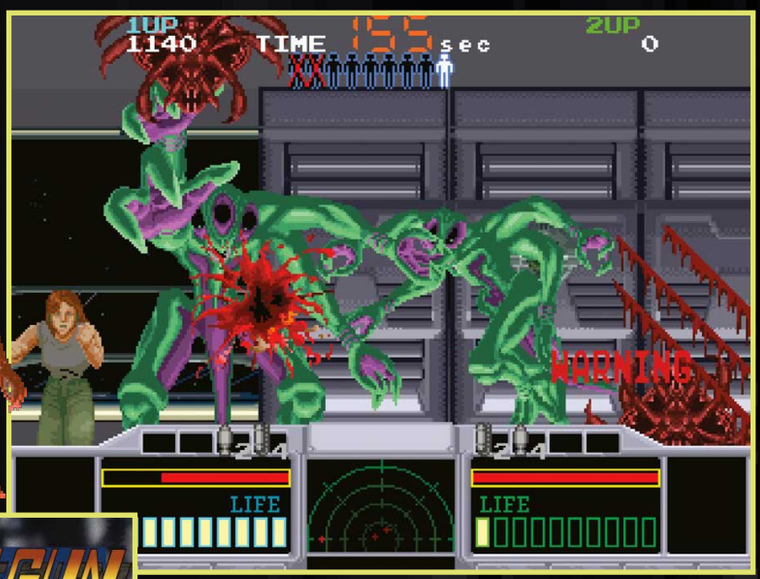
SPACE GUN

"THE GALAXY IS BEING INVADED!" SCREAMS THE SPACE GUN FLYER. "DESTROY THE MONSTERS WITH HIGH-POWERED, PUMP-ACTION MACHINE GUNS!" YOU DON'T NEED TO ASK RETRO GAMER TWICE. JOIN US AS WE GRAB OUR PLASTIC GUNS AND TAKE ON TAITO'S EXPLOSIVE SCI-FI SHOOTER

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** TAITO
- **DEVELOPER:** TAITO
- **PLATFORM:** ARCADE. VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1990
- **GENRE:** LIGHTGUN SHOOTER



» The influence of *Aliens* and also the original 1979 movie is strong in the arcade artwork.

» [Arcade] Things quickly get chaotic, as you try to annihilate the aliens without hitting the human survivors.

» For its home conversions, Ocean commissioned illustrator Bob Wakelin to produce new cover artwork.

In the era of the arcade lightgun game, Taito was king. Its 1987 military shooter *Operation Wolf* was a global hit, heralding the genre's return to the forefront of the arcades for the first time since the electro-mechanical days of the Sixties and Seventies. Numerous clones quickly followed, and Taito itself got in on the act with a direct follow-up, *Operation Thunderbolt*, released the following year. The sequel added a second gun for co-op play. Others went further. Why settle for two guns when you can have three?

While Taito would release two further *Operation* games in the Nineties, the next evolution of what it started with *Operation Wolf* can be seen in 1990's *Space Gun*. Before we get stuck in, let's start off with that generic title. The game's producer Atsuchi Taniguchi has since revealed that *Space Gun* was the game's in-development title that somehow stuck. Indeed, intro screens for alternative titles *Annihilator* and *Creatures Shock* are buried in the game. Still, *Space Gun* describes the game to a tee. The military theme is gone and this is a sci-fi shooter, set in the year 2039. Camo-clad enemies have been replaced by drooling, bipedal aliens who've invaded a spaceship and a nearby colonised planet. Players take the role of two heavily armed soldiers tasked with destroying the aliens and rescuing the human survivors. If the set-up sounds oddly familiar... just wait until you play the game. Are those alien

» [Arcade] At several points you encounter junctions where you can choose between two different routes.

"THE NEXT EVOLUTION OF WHAT TAITO STARTED WITH OPERATION WOLF CAN BE SEEN IN SPACE GUN"

eggs, emitting spidery creatures that attempt to hug your face? Have humans been cocooned in goop for some sinister purpose? Is that an exact replica of an M577 Armoured Personnel Carrier parked up in the background? Yes, the creators appear to have watched James Cameron's *Aliens* once or twice. Sega would later return the favour by heavily borrowing bits from *Space Gun* for its licensed arcade game *Alien 3: The Gun*.

Theme aside, the game does introduce some welcome innovations to the standard lightgun shooter. Building on *Operation Thunderbolt*, which alternated between side-scrolling and into-the-screen stages, *Space Gun* incorporates both styles into individual stages, which does help mask the on-rails gameplay somewhat. Taking this further, several stages feature branching paths, giving players alternative routes to their goal. In addition, the cabinet is fitted with foot pedals which, when pressed, reverse your direction of travel. This is perfect if you want to grab a fleeting power-up, or deal with a persistent enemy. Crucially though, it gives the player the notion that they have some semblance of control and aren't just being dragged through the game by their ears.

Key elements from the two *Operation* games do remain. Your overriding mission is to rescue the survivors, who typically run around the screen, flapping their arms, inviting to get shot. They might as well be wearing a big orange hat that says 'shoot me'. If you accidentally cap them all the mission ends abruptly. Bosses are back too, only now there's one at the end of most stages and they play out more like mini setpieces. There's no Alien Queen, surprisingly, but instead a rogue's gallery of Giger-esque abominations with lots of teeth and protruding extremities. Finally, *Space Gun* retains the twin endings – one good and one bad. The final battle takes place in the cockpit of a space shuttle, which is swarming with enemies. If you're a lousy shot and ▶

CONVERSION CAPERS

LET'S DISSECT THE VARIOUS HOME VERSIONS

COMMODORE 64

■ Screenshots don't do this version justice, emphasising those blocky enemies. But in motion it plays well, at a pace that's close to the coin-op. Moody music plays throughout (but there's no sound effects option). It's much better than *Operation Thunderbolt* and *Line Of Fire*.

ATARI ST

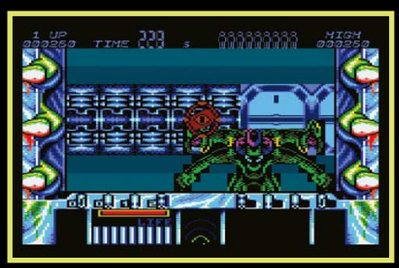
■ The 16-bit computer versions are easily the most faithful, supporting co-op play and featuring all of the coin-op's stages and bosses. The graphics are clean and colourful. There's just one issue: loading! The game loads between and during stages, affecting the pacing.

ZX SPECTRUM

■ At a time when most Speccy games were monochrome, this heaps on the colour. Visually the result is messy and it can be hard to work out what you're actually shooting, but it does capture the garishness of the coin-op. A couple of bosses are missing from this version.

AMIGA

■ The 16-bit version was developed for the ST and then ported to the Amiga, so it's identical in terms of visuals and performance, with the usual audio improvements being the main difference. Like the ST version, it also supports joystick, mouse and lightgun controls.



AMSTRAD CPC PLUS

■ This is a strange brew. The border and backgrounds use the Plus hardware's enhanced colours, but the enemy graphics appear to have been ported over unoptimised from another version. Look at those unmasked sprites! It chugs when the screen gets busy too.

MASTER SYSTEM

■ The sole console version suffers from small sprites, which reduce the impact of the enemies in the side-scrolling sections (they 'bite' from afar). Thankfully, the bosses are larger and more effective. Overall this is one of the better Light Phaser games available for Sega's console.

DEVELOPER Q&A

TOM PINNOCK SHARES HIS MEMORIES OF CODING THE COMMODORE 64 CONVERSION

How did the *Space Gun* job come about?
I worked for Images Software which was primarily a conversion house, so once our boss Karl Jeffery had the *Space Gun* deal sorted, it was just given to the next spare programmer. I'd just finished *Chip's Challenge* for the C64, and Karl asked if I could do it.

> "HAVING A COIN-OP OF OUR OWN WAS A GODSEND"

What did you think of *Space Gun*, the coin-op at the time?
I'd never heard of it before, but I was soon a big fan when the arcade machine turned up in the office. They couldn't get it up the stairs though, so it sat at the bottom, infuriating the neighbours, blasting noise out of the door at all hours. These were the old days when all you usually got sent was a grainy video showing the game – if anything! So having a coin-op of our own was a godsend. Most of my work was from a video we shot of someone completing it.

Did you consider adding a two-player co-op mode, or adding lightgun or mouse support to *Space Gun*?
I remember doing the two-player mode, employing a flicker effect using the same sprite if there were two players. It didn't make it into the game, but I definitely wrote the code for it. We were never going to support other controllers. I was stuck in a room with the Spectrum and Amstrad coder Damian Stones for the duration of the development and we just wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible.

The Commodore 64 version was also released on cartridge. Did this present any issues, or benefits?
The cartridge version was fine once I got the compaction routine working. I remember having to delete an entire level, though, because of limited cartridge space. Once I had the tape and disk versions done, the cartridge was relatively easy.

Looking back, are you pleased with how the conversion turned out?
I'm fairly happy with it, though I noticed recently that I only mentioned the producer Maxwell Taylor in the final scrolling text when you complete the game. I've no idea why he's not mentioned on the title screen.

What did Maxwell's role as a producer on *Space Gun* entail?
Just to make sure we were on time. I remember Maxwell was a quiet chap, who was quite shocked at mine and Damian's drunken antics one night when we all went out to a nightclub. Then we turned up early the next day, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, to carry on coding. Those young and carefree days! I was only 22.

» In addition to *Space Gun*, Tom coded *Chip's Challenge* and *Back To The Future II* for the C64.

» [Arcade] The first boss you face is a biter. Defang it with a barrage of shots to its face.

keep blasting the shuttle's control panel, it will eventually explode and the mission will end in a blinding flash of light. But if you succeed, you'll safely return to Earth (although you're pursued by an alien ship, setting up a sequel that never arrived).

All of these features enhance the game, but let's be honest, it's the gunplay that really matters. In this regard *Space Gun* delivers. By using otherworldly creatures Taito could dial up the gore score. Their bodies explode into bloody chunks after just a few shots, and it's possible to shoot off limbs like some proto *Dead Space*. The actual guns you use to play amplify the effect. Mimicking *Aliens*, they feature a pump-action grip which you repeatedly pull to cycle through the four special weapon types – Flame, Bomb, Blade and Freeze. This was a masterstroke move by the cab designers, adding an extra tactile element to the experience.

Games-X magazine highlighted this feature in its review following the game's November 1990 debut. "Walking into an arcade and discovering a cabinet with two plastic guns is nothing new nowadays," it wrote. "What sets this game apart from all others lies in the pump-action facility." *Zero* magazine praised the setting and gameplay, awarding it 4/5. "A very creepy *Aliens*-type atmosphere pervades the whole game. [It's] real gun-toting, heart-stopping excitement and no mistake." *Sinclair User* gave it that telltale, noncommittal score of 73%. "Competently done, *Space Gun* is OK if you like that kind of thing. At least it has the virtue that you are blasting away at aliens rather than real human beings." *Amiga Power* called it "boringly average".

Ocean Software acquired the conversion license, continuing its long-running relationship with Taito. This was the era when Ocean was moving more into movie licences and 3D simulators, so it handed the job to conversion house Images Software. Released in early 1992, the Atari ST and Amiga versions are admirably close to the coin-op, including co-op play and support for the Trojan Phazer lightgun. In comparison, the 8-bit versions are all one-player only and limited to joystick and key controls. They're

» [Arcade] Similar to *Operation Thunderbolt*, a couple of stages see you jump behind the wheel of a vehicle.

» [Arcade] It appears that the spaceship crew failed to thwart the alien threat.

also missing the penultimate stage and lack the back-pedal feature. The game was also converted to the Sega Master System and released in late-1992. This version is also single-player only, but it does support the Light Phaser gun. It was developed by Japanese developer Cream, under contract with Taito, yet the game was only officially released in Europe and Australia.

> "THE GUNS FEATURE A PUMP-ACTION GRIP WHICH YOU PULL TO CYCLE THROUGH THE WEAPON TYPES"

The arcade version was one of 29 games included in the 2005 collection *Taito Legends*, released for the PlayStation 2, Xbox and PC. None of these versions support lightguns, but on PC you can use a mouse (which makes the game super easy). More recently *Space Gun* was included as part of Taito's *Operation Night Strikers*, released for Steam and Nintendo's Switch in 2025. This compilation also includes *Operation Wolf*, *Operation Thunderbolt* and *Night Striker* (we awarded *Operation Night Strikers* 87% in **RG** 277). Lightguns are out of the equation but you can use Joy-Con gyro-aiming on the Switch, plus mouse controls on Switch 2. Developer M2 also ported a bunch of the home conversions and released them as paid DLC, titled *CS Pack*. On this you'll find the uncommon Master System version of *Space Gun* alongside some other deep cuts from Taito's archives. ★

BOMB THE BASE

A RUNDOWN OF THE SPECIAL WEAPONS AVAILABLE

FLAME

Burn them with fire. Yes, it's the timeless xenomorph extermination method. Probably the most useful weapon in the game, as not only is it powerful, but it has excellent range. Don't waste this on boss fights. Instead, save it for when the screen is swarming with enemies.

BOMB

This is just like the classic rocket grenade from *Operation Wolf*. Shoot it directly at a formidable foe and it will detonate instantly. It does deliver some splash damage, but not as much as you might expect, so make sure you're on target. It's great against bosses.

BLADE

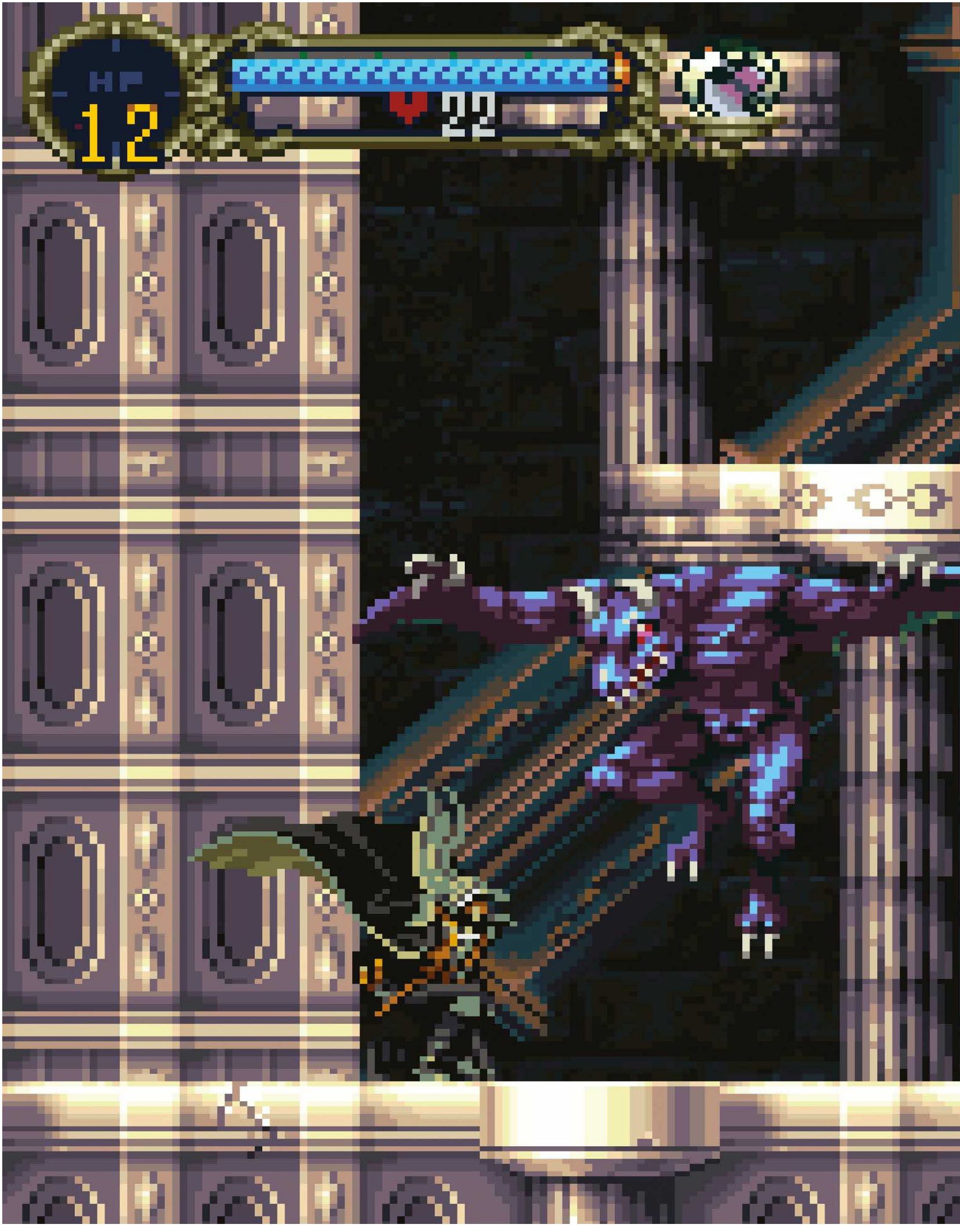
Use this when only total bodily dismemberment will do. It emits a horizontal flash of energy that cuts through enemies and causes them to explode in spectacular fashion. It's very powerful, but its area of impact is quite narrow, making it the least effective weapon.

FREEZE

If revenge is a dish best served cold… freeze instantly turns all enemies into blocks of ice. It will kill some enemies instantly, while others will be temporarily frozen (hit them with your regular fire while they're suspended). A handy weapon for chilling out the bosses.

» [Master System] The only console version plays at a fairly sedate pace, but it retains the coin-op's atmosphere and playability.

» [ZX Spectrum] The Speccy version uses character block graphics to side-step colour clash issues.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Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night

A MACABRE MASTERPIECE

» PLAYSTATION » 1997
» KONAMI COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT TOKYO

It's been nearly 30 years since I first played *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night,* but I can still remember that first playthrough like it was yesterday. It was Christmas 1997 and it was the only game I cared about getting. I gave Melanie constant reminders and even preordered her a copy at Software Box, so all she had to do was collect it, and obviously pay for it.

Christmas Day finally arrived and once we'd done all the family stuff, I sat down to play my new game, and it was everything I hoped for and more. I loved playing *Super Castlevania IV* on the SNES and *Bloodlines* on the Mega Drive and all the articles I had read suggested that *Symphony Of The Night* was going to blow them both away. Those early assessments were not wrong.

While some reviews had been critical of the game's 2D look, I personally thought it looked spectacular and as we now know, it's aged far better than so many of the 3D games that were released at the same time. As detailed as the sprites were and as beautiful as the game looked back then, it was the soundtrack that truly blew me away.

While there's no denying that *Super Castlevania IV*'s soundtrack is a genuinely impressive piece of work, particularly when you consider the SNES' sonic capabilities, *Symphony Of The Night* is on another level entirely. Its tunes jump easily from toe-tapping melodies to sombre, haunting epics and they're as important to the game's mood and atmosphere as the painstakingly detailed environments are.

There's more to Konami's game than nice aesthetics however and while the gameplay itself wasn't quite as new to me as it was to others (let's face it, it's effectively a more impressive take on Westone's *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap*) it felt significantly more evolved than the linear Mega Drive and SNES *Castlevania* games.

I had tremendous fun that Christmas break and when I realised there was a whole new inverted castle to discover, I went through the game again. In fact, I recently started replaying it on my Steam Deck as you can add Achievements, and while I haven't made anywhere near as much progress, the game's unmistakable magic is still there. ✱

サイヴァリア THE HISTORY OF PSYVARIAR

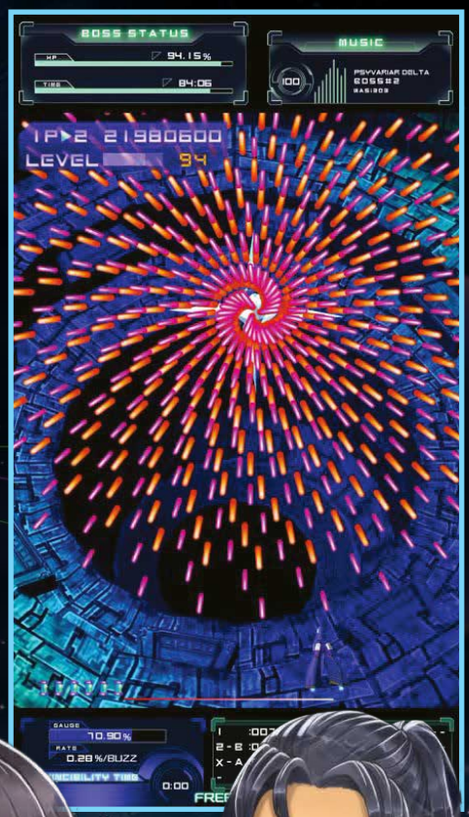
SOME 26 YEARS SINCE THE RELEASE OF A TRULY NEW GAME IN THE CULT ARCADE SHOOTER SERIES, PSYVARIAR 3 IS FINALLY HERE. WITH LAUNCH DAY UPON US, THOSE THAT WORKED ACROSS THE PSYVARIAR SERIES SHARE WHAT MADE SUCCESS' BULLET GRAZING, RULE-BREAKING SHOOTER QUITE SO SPECIAL

WORDS BY WILL FREEMAN

» Better knowvn to arcade players as WASi303, Tetsuro Sato has served as composer across the *Psyvariar* series, and many other shmups.

» A stalwart at Success Corporation, Shinya Nagatomo has stood as a producer and designer on shooters including *Sonic Wings Reunion* and *Cotton Rock'n'Roll*.

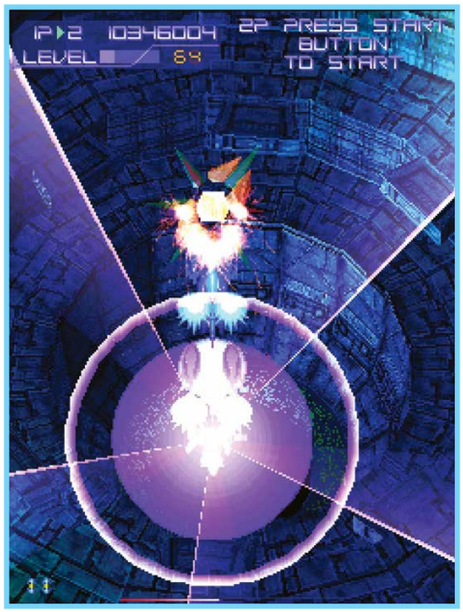
» [Arcade] *Psyvariar Delta AC* took the 2018 console reworking of the first two versions of the arcade original back to the arcade, via the exA-Arcadia arcade system.



» Founding Success Corporation way back in 1978, Yoshinari Takato still heads the company, presiding through many eras of arcade gaming.

» As the boss of Brazilian studio Banana Bytes, Rafael Lima de Souza is best known for his work on the indie shmup *Sophstar*.

» Red Art Games Romain Mahut was part of the team that inspired Success Corporation to return to the *Psyvariar* series.



» [Arcade] You do get a traditional bomb across the *Psyvariar* games, but often you'll be so focussed on precise grazing you may miss the chance to deploy it.

» [Arcade] As with so many shooting games, a vast amount of the scoring pours in with the stage-end bonus – which rewards all that bullet grazing effort one more time.

It can be argued that 2D shmups are a highly constrained genre. A firm ruleset defines their design, and devoted players expect obedience to that template. It is, after all, the foundation of the level playing field that lets us compare skill. Most shooting games by far scroll vertically or horizontally, provide five to six stages, start players off with a stock of three lives, serve up a couple of weapons and some kind of bomb system, see every stage capped with a boss, and offer obscure intricate scoring systems behind deceptively straightforward shooting and dodging action.

The capacity for innovation in the 2D shooter genre, then, comes in the nuance within the framework of that template. A simple tweak to a scoring system can vastly shift how a shooter feels, how it should be played, and what strategies allow domination. That is especially evident in the *Psyvariar* series, which stands as one of the most esteemed – if underexposed – examples of a true 'bullet grazing' shmup.

> "IT'S ALL ABOUT GIVING THE PLAYER VARIETY"
> RAFAEL LIMA DE SOUZA

'Grazing' refers to the deliberate player act of getting as close as possible to enemy bullets, in return for some kind of reward, which typically means points. *Psyvariar* isn't the only grazing shooter (see the Feel The Buzz panel). It isn't even the first, that honour seemingly going to the 1996 shmup *Raiden Fighters*, or even NMK's 1995 game *Uchuu Sensou*, if you count unreleased titles. A year earlier still, *Raiden DX*'s GUTS system gave players a rating and bonus score for how dangerously they played, factoring in bullet proximity as part of the formula. *Psyvariar*, though, took what bullet grazing could be to a whole new level. Since the very first *Psyvariar* game, there have been a surprising number of variants of that original release (see the Revisionist History panel), but it all started when *Psyvariar: Medium Unit* arrived in Japan's game centres in 2000. It was, at a glance, a highly typical shmup. There was a branching level structure, whereby different stages of varying challenge were made available depending on your performance in previous levels, but on the whole, it appeared devotedly conventional. And it was. It is just that the approach to grazing had a profound effect on how you played the game – even entirely inverting the traditional player mindset of shooting everything that moves and steering well clear of danger.

The team at Success Corporation – a company likely most famous for the *Cotton* games – built the entire game around grazing, with its own spin which was branded the Buzz system. Grazing bullets in *Psyvariar: Medium Unit* would fill a meter on the HUD. Each time that gauge topped out, the player ship would level-up, increasing firepower and, more importantly, providing a brief flash of invincibility, allowing pilots to charge through dense bullet patterns or intentionally collide with enemies. Play well enough to open the most difficult, bullet-dense path through the game, and opportunities to Buzz to the point that levelling-up sometimes happened over and over in constant chains, and it was possible to stay invincible – as long as you kept Buzzing.

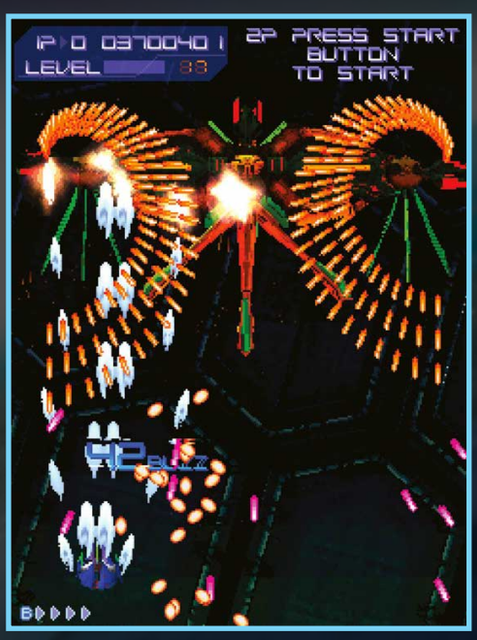
When the game was remixed as *Psyvariar: Revision*, the team added the ability to graze individual bullets more than once. As a result, players could graze a bullet cloud, charge away to an enemy when invincible, before returning to graze again. By the

REVISIONIST HISTORY

UNDERSTANDING THE NUMEROUS PSYVARIAR REMIXES AND REWORKINGS

There are a lot of different *Psyvariar* games. And yet we're only just seeing number three in the series. So what's going on? In short, the longstanding Japanese developer and publisher Success Corporation has a bit of a habit of reworking the original game. It all started with *Psyvariar: Medium Unit*, which introduced the fundamental scoring and survival Buzz system that made the series so loved. That same year, *Psyvariar: Revision* arrived in arcades, remixing stages, adjusting the Buzz system so single bullets could be repeatedly grazed, and making other refinements that greatly improved the game. *Revision* would in time make it to Sony's PlayStation 2 and several Japanese mobile platforms. Then came the PS2 release *Complete Edition*, which bundled *Medium Unit* and *Revision*. There were also special editions of *Complete Edition*; the *Special Sound Box* included the game's musical score on CD, while the *Special Capture Box* included a superplay DVD of expert runs. Then in 2018 *Psyvariar Delta* compiled *Medium Unit* and *Revision*, along with newly remixed stages. Then in 2020, *Psyvariar Delta AC* saw a distinct version head to the exA-Arcadia arcade system. Amidst all that, *Psyvariar 2* launched on arcade, Dreamcast, PlayStation 2 and Xbox through 2003 and 2004 – without myriad remakes.

» [Arcade] *Psyvariar: Revision* quickly followed up the original game, tweaking the Buzz system and rearranging stages.



» [Arcade] The original *Psyvariar: Medium Unit* was certainly improved on by newly arranged remakes, but the founding quality and Buzz system were firmly in place.

» [Arcade] The fact that bullet grazing can open brief windows of invincibility has allowed the team behind *Psyvariar* to pack the games with highly dense bullet patterns.

» [Arcade] With a wiggle of an arcade stick – or a button press in later games – all your firepower can be brought together as a laser-like 'Rolling Shot'.

» [Arcade] Effectively, every boss in the series provides opportunities to build up towering Buzz combos, pushing both your score and firepower level.

FEEL THE BUZZ

PSYVARIAR ISN'T THE ONLY GRAZING SHMUP OUT THERE. HERE ARE SIX MORE EXAMPLES THAT YOU SHOULD EXPERIENCE

DODONPACHI II

■ In the 2001 arcade exclusive notably not developed by *DoDonPachi* creator Cave, players can select a traditional bomb or Energy Style ship. Pick the latter, and skimming bullets fills a gauge. When maxed out, you can spend the meter unleashing a powerful bullet-cancelling, screen-clearing laser.

RADIANT SILVERGUN

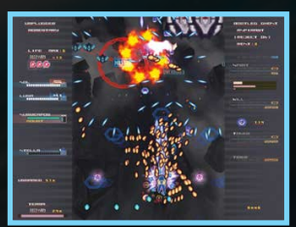
■ One of the most celebrated shmups there is, Treasure's *Radiant Silvergun* features a simple grazing mechanic amidst its cocktail of scoring systems. Graze a bullet, and you get points. It's a system that becomes particularly important in giving you the scoring edge through the boss battles.

RAIDEN FIGHTERS JET

■ Renowned for its famously elaborate, rather arcane scoring systems, the sublime *Raiden Fighters Jet* introduces a rather distinct combo grazing system. For each bullet you graze back-to-back, a scoring multiplier climbs. Drop the grazing for just 60 frames, however, and the multiplier resets.

DANMAKU UNLIMITED 2

■ Doragon Entertainment's superb 2013 indie shmup was heavily inspired by Cave's works, and introduced a graze system that was deeply integrated into the wider scoring. The total bullets grazed on a stage would interact with other multipliers and tallies through a stage, boosting score bonuses.



HELLSINKER

■ Another indie shmup, this time from 2007, and potentially trumping *Raiden Fighters Jet* for complexity, Ruminant's Whimper's *Hellsinker* deployed a grazing system for all sorts, from speeding up weapon-power recovery to the range at which you can seal enemies in place, preventing them from firing.

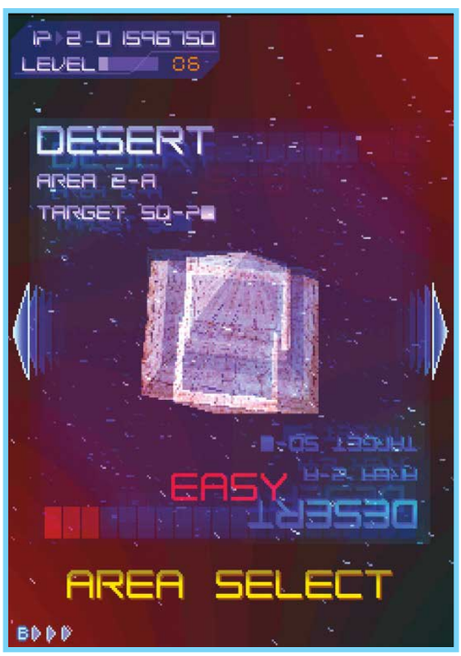
SISTERS ROYALE

■ As Alfa System's spiritual successor of the *Shikigami no Shiro* series – which also had grazing – *Sisters Royale* released in 2018. Here proximity to a bullet or enemy introduced a scoring multiplier, which climbed the closer you got to an object, offering a distinct take on grazing.

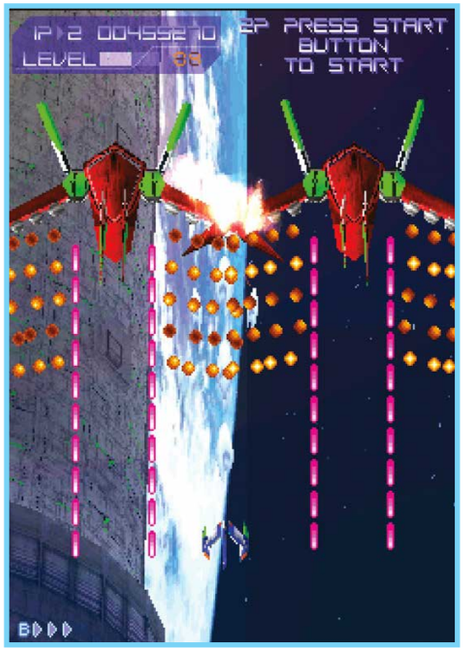
time *Psyvariar 2* arrived for Sega's NAOMI arcade system in 2003, the team at Success had perfected the blend of bullet patterns, enemy placement, and player movement that delivered some of the most thrilling, even counter-intuitive risk-reward play in the genre.

Simply put, the focus on grazing and invincibility manipulation encouraged a highly distinct player approach, that was dynamic and pacey, and very able to bring about moments of high drama and unexpected turns of fate. After just a few credits with your first *Psyvariar* game, you learn to avoid shooting as much as possible, letting enemy ranks amass at the top of the screen, unleashing ever more bullets to Buzz. Graze successfully, and the audio alert 'level-up!' rings out over and over, with barely a moment between each announcement if you play well. In those moments of repeated invulnerability, you can use your ship as a battering ram, ignoring dodging and shooting. The emphasis on highly risky play, pursuing the bullets normally instinctively avoided, and charging into the most dangerous areas of the game in a hope to maintain invincibility as the bullet count goes wild makes playing a *Psyvariar* game highly thrilling – and even gives the game the feeling of being something of an anti-shmup.

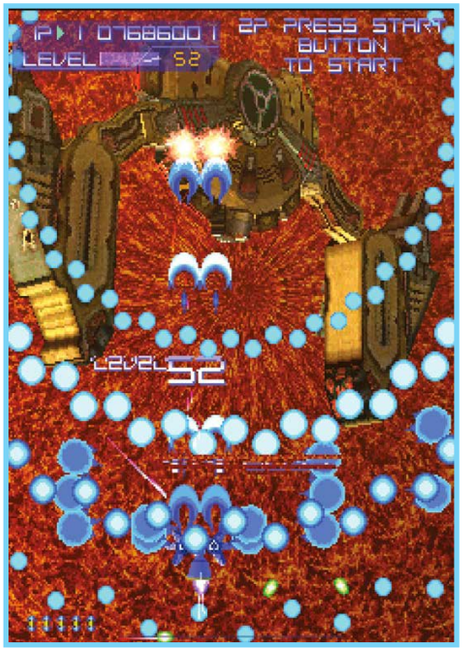
"It's a little counter-intuitive at first, but once you get the hang of it, it almost feels like entering a kind of zen state where you move from level-up to level-up while chaining shield activations," suggests Rafael Lima de Souza, founder and CEO at Banana Bytes, which



» [Arcade] The various *Psyvariar* games offer branching stages – to unlock the harder options with greater scoring opportunities you'll have to push hard on every level.



» [Arcade] Almost every enemy from tiny popcorn foes to full bosses unleash bullet patterns that offer bullet grazing puzzles. Learning how to take advantage of each is highly rewarding.



» [Arcade] There's a story to follow that starts from *Psyvariar: Medium Unit* – but the real narrative is your own; the tale of your journey to mastery.

» [Arcade] Bullet clouds and a terrifying laser? Bring it on! Grazing bullets creates windows of invincibility. As the bullet count goes up, so do chances to become invulnerablee - though skill is still required.

» [Dreamcast] The *Psyvariar* games have always been colourful affairs, but *Psyvariar 2* took vibrancy to the next level.

» [Dreamcast] The boss battles are the stand out feature of every *Psyvariar* game thus far – and they'll finish you off a lot, as seen here.

made the highly regarded indie shooter *Sophstar*, before joining Red Art Games to co-develop *Psyvariar 3*, which is out May 21, 2026. "In most shooters, bullets are purely something to avoid. In *Psyvariar*, they become part of your strategy, and that constant balance between danger and reward, grazing bullets and using your shield to make the best of the score system, is what makes the series feel so unique and thrilling to play."

> "WE DRANK TOO MUCH GIN AND LIME"
> TETSURO SATO

"That game mechanic where one's own ship levels up by grazing bullets was designed from the planning stage as a shooting game that would offer a new experience," adds Takashi Egawano, variously a producer, programming lead, composer and designer across *Medium Unit*, *Psyvariar 2* and *Psyvariar Delta*. "However, the exhilaration we felt when we actually implemented it in the game and played it exceeded our expectations. This was something that could only be experienced through continuous levelling-up during the invincibility period, and it was something that could not be conveyed at all through the written proposal alone."

As such, the Buzz system became a mainstay of the entire *Psyvariar* series, and is, over a quarter of a century on, going to be a mainstay of *Psyvariar 3* – but not only because it offers shmup devotees something nuanced and distinct to get their teeth into.

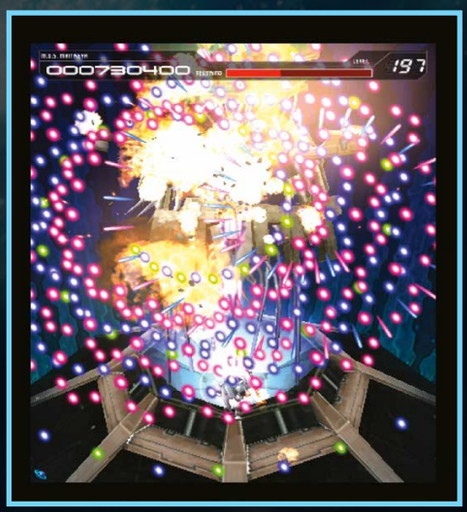
"*Psyvariar* might not be considered a shooting game in the conventional sense, as players tend to shoot less as they improve," proposes Egawano. "However, the series' signature pleasant background music and sound effects, along with the exhilarating feeling of achieving consecutive level-ups, should be appealing to a wide range of players."

And absolutely, perhaps surprisingly, all the *Psyvariar* titles do offer broad appeal. While there is immense capacity to push what is possible at the top end, where players that obsess over scoring system nuance and practice relentlessly can unearth all manner of advanced strategies, for the casual genre fan there's plenty of fun to be had simply dodging and shooting, and levelling-up your weapon by grazing a few bullets; in part because the games also offer such a marvellous 'place' to spend time. Simply put, the series has brought us games that offer a high skill ceiling, over and above a high difficulty ceiling – an approach so often found in shmups that appeal to both hardcore and casual players.

For all this talk of bullet grazing, the *Psyvariar* games also serve up a fairly atypical style, and a glorious musical score that blends the likes of trance and epic piano to embed you in a world that is otherworldly and unusual. There's a dream-like nature to a world that hints at the organic, deep sea creatures, and insect-like entities, whispering at the aesthetic of *R-Type*, even if everything is largely built from cold, hard metal and robotic tentacles, while the players pilot mechs comparable to those in games like *Aleste*.

Across most of the series, the legendary game composer Tetsuro Sato, also known as WASi303, has taken the reins of composing the music and many of the sound effects. You'll find his work across *Psyvariar: Medium Unit*, *Psyvariar: Revision*, *Psyvariar: Complete Edition*, *Psyvariar 2: The Will To Fabricate* and *Psyvariar Delta*. Beyond Success' grazing series, his credits also include *Raiden Fighters Aces*, *Deathsmiles IIX: Makai no Merry Christmas*, *DoDonPachi Maximum*, *R-Type Final 3 Evolved*, *Rainbow Cotton* and many more.

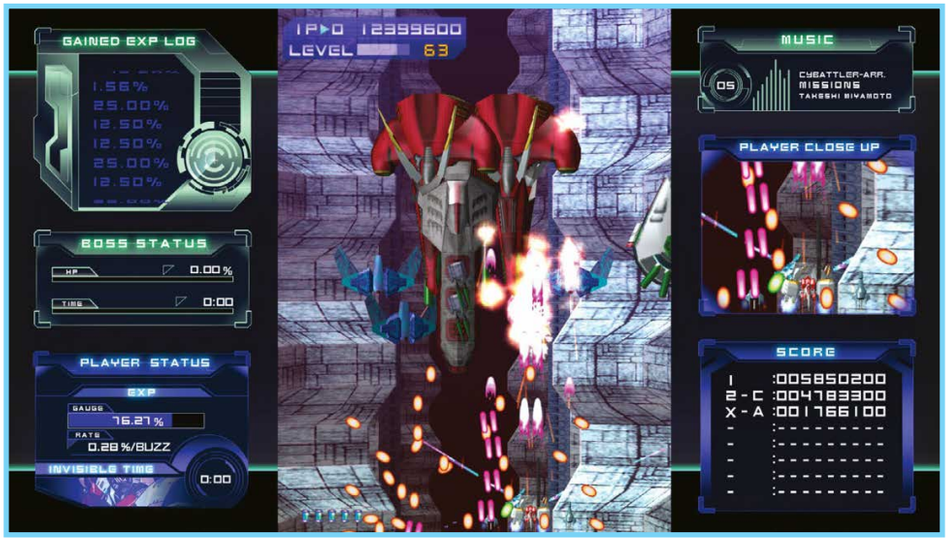
"*Psyvariar* encompasses a supernatural universe known as Reishiryokugaku (or Psionic



» [Dreamcast] When *Psyvariar 2*'s magnificent bosses finally fall, they really do go down with a great degree of spectacle.

» [Dreamcast] *Psyvariar 2*'s lasers feel inconsequential compared to the mesmerising bullet patterns – but provide a focussed opportunity to push your graze levelling skyward.

» [Dreamcast] *Psyvariar*'s grid-like bullet patterns evolved to compliment the grazing gameplay style that insists you try and get close to numerous bullets simultaneously.



» [PC] *Psyvariar Delta* was released in 2018 for consoles and PC and contained *Medium Unit* and *Revision*, as well as remixes of stages and music.

Mechanics)," Sato explains. "I wanted to use music to further deepen that fantastical atmosphere. By weaving in cinematic elements and pursuing a sense of immersion that draws players deeply into that world, I arrived at dream trance as the answer.

"Inspired by Robert Miles, who was dominating the scene at the time, I constructed a sound centred around piano melodies. As a result, I take great pride in having etched the vivid image of '*Psyvariar* equals piano' into the minds of so many players."

> "STAY TUNED AND HAVE EXPECTATIONS"
> YOSHINARI TAKATO

Anyone who has spent time with *Psyvariar* will know how central to the experience those piano melodies are – and that, even hundreds of miles from the nearest arcade or console, to hear just a flourish of *Psyvariar*'s sonic elements is to be immediately transported to the series' world.

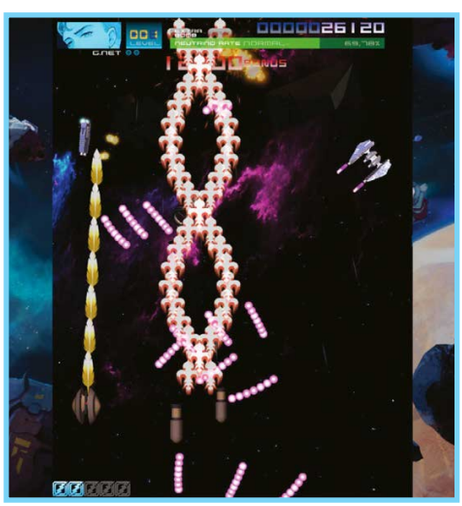
"The production process for *Psyvariar* was incredibly interesting," Sato continues, before revealing a playful confession. "First, I would write the music, and then the programmer would listen to the tracks intently while building the stage layout. I believe this music-driven approach is what allowed us to create stages where the music's energy and rhythm synced perfectly. I think a major factor in making this possible was the shared hobby we had. After work, and especially on weekends, we would frequent clubs where the latest electronic music was blasting. Amid the energy of the dance floor, we'd discuss things like, 'With this sound, a stage layout like this should work perfectly,' and build a creative consensus between us. Well, there were times when we drank too much gin and lime and had forgotten about half of what we'd discussed by the next morning, though."

Despite the role gin and lime may have had in *Psyvariar*'s production, so successful was the work of WASi303 that the soundtrack is renowned as one of arcade gaming's best, and is deeply popular with players who hardly ever touch a 2D shooter.

Everything learned through the process of designing the first *Psyvariar* (including those numerous variants), its systems, its world, and its music, would ultimately come together to make *Psyvariar 2* the ultimate game where survival and grazing and scoring and atmosphere share a stunning harmony. Success would devote a considerably larger team to the game. And yet some of those involved in *Psyvariar 2* longed to be even more ambitious.

"*Psyvariar 1* was developed by a small team of just a few people, but *Psyvariar 2*'s development scale more than tripled, so we wanted to add dramatic developments that weren't possible in the previous game," Egawano remembers. "However, due to the development time constraints, we couldn't incorporate all the scenes we originally planned, and I still regret that the game was released with an incomplete game balance."

That's a rather surprising reveal, as *Psyvariar 2* is broadly considered to be an



» [PC] *Psyvariar 3* promises to capture all the magic of the original games. Having enjoyed *Sophstar* immensely, we know the new game is in safe hands with Banana Bytes.

» [PC] The newest game delves into Success' back catalogue and includes Cotton as a playable character.

exceptional shooter, loved by many fans, and able to command dizzying collector prices, particularly for the Xbox version, which can set you back a couple of hundred pounds.

Certainly, the *Psyvariar* games aren't as well known as the likes of Cave's titles, genre stalwarts such as *Raiden*, *R-Type* and *Gradius*, or even Success' own *Cotton* series. And yet among genre devotees and competitive shmup players, *Psyvariar: Revision* and *Psyvariar 2* are particularly well regarded. While a compilation of *Psyvariar: Medium Unit* and *Psyvariar: Revision* did make it to the West via the Playstation 2 (with *Delta* later coming to Switch and Steam globally), the series has always deserved more attention. And now, finally, after *Delta* reminded us all how much we missed Success' grazing games, *Psyvariar 3* is finally here, with a fully global release across PlayStation 5, Xbox Series S/X, Switch, Switch 2, and PC – with some platforms enjoying physical regular and special editions via Red Art Games.

We can only hope the series' quality and distinctness continues, meaning *Psyvariar 3* could serve as a gateway for more players to enjoy this wonderful, underexposed series.

As for Success' broader plans for its stable of shooting games, time will tell. *Cotton* has seen all manner of reworkings and reboots released of late, while Success brought back Video System's *Sonic Wings* series as *Sonic Wings Reunion* in 2025. Yet shooter properties such as *Guardian Force* are still awaiting any kind of sequel. And according to Success' founder, the company is very open to more projects working with external developers.

"Going forward, we will continue to prioritise what our fans enjoy most, regardless of whether the content is developed in-house or by a third party," confirms Yoshinari Takato, who established Success way back in 1978.

And then, rather unexpectedly, he appears to hint that *Psyvariar 3* might not be the last game in the series we see. "Stay tuned and have expectations," Takato suggests, before uttering a single digit, "*4*." ✱

DEVELOPER Q+A

THOSE INVOLVED IN PSYVARIAR 3 SHARE ITS INCEPTION STORY

Shinya Nagatomo, a producer at Success Corporation, Romain Mahut, business development & communications at Red Art Games and Rafael Lima de Souza, the founder and CEO of Banana Bytes discuss making a new *Psyvariar* game.

Why return to make a new *Psyvariar* after all these years?

Shinya Nagatomo: It all started when Red Art Games approached us about porting the second game. Since the rights to the second game hadn't been fully settled yet, they told us, "If you're going to make a third game, we'll grant you permission." That's how this project began. For *Psyvariar*, being able to announce this title on the 25th anniversary of its arcade debut may have been a coincidence, but I believe it was also inevitable. With the release of the Nintendo Switch 2, I'm delighted that the third game has arrived at this pivotal moment in history.

Romain Mahut: "We wanted to bring back this iconic franchise in a way that would please both hardcore fans of the franchise and more casual shooting game fans. In order to reach more players than the single *Psyvariar* fanbase, we've also added a couple of guest characters: Cotton from the eponymous series and Soph from *Sophstar*. We wanted to make this a celebration of shoot-'em-ups. And because we love physical games, we of course created a couple of *Psyvariar 3* physical editions."

What has been the vision for the game, and how much have you evolved *Psyvariar 3*'s founding mechanics?

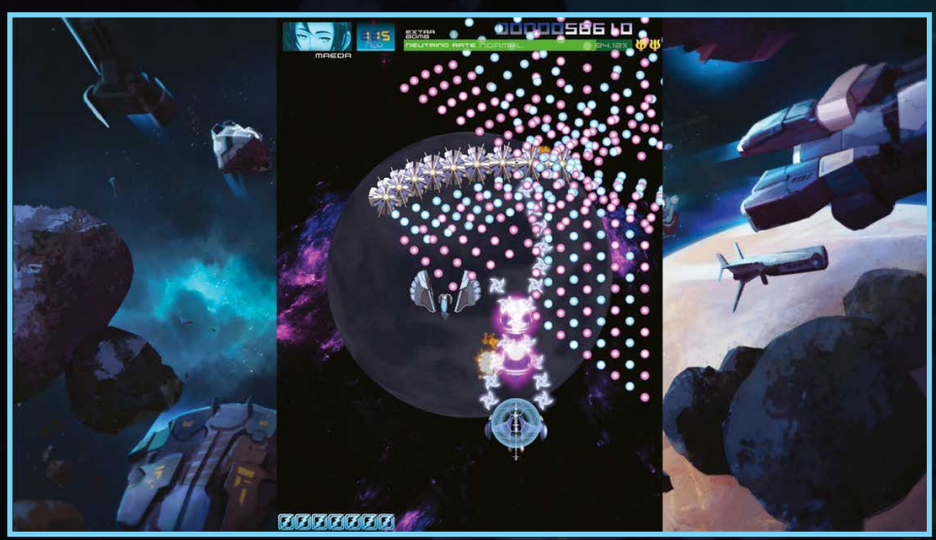
Rafael Lima de Souza: "We wanted *Psyvariar 3* to keep that same sense of intensity and risk/reward that defines the series, but we also thought we could expand on the Buzz and shield mechanics, offering the player different ways to engage with it. With seven different playable pilots, each one introduces a new way to engage with the score system, like staying close to the enemies for more points, raising a multiplier when killing enemies with the shield active, or grazing bullets to charge a special weapon that can be used to chain enemies for bonuses. We also kept the Shot and Buzz [ship] archetypes from *Psyvariar 2*, so it's all about giving the player variety while keeping what worked on the previous games, always focussing on the Buzz and shield system. We even used one mechanic from the lesser-known *Psyvariar Reassemble* which we felt was really fun to use and deserved a comeback. We also focussed on making the experience welcoming to new players while still offering depth for veterans. You can focus on beating the game first, and then learning the routing for better scoring later.

How much were the Success team, as the series creators, involved in *Psyvariar 3*?

SN: First, we had Red Art Games and Banana Bytes create their initial vision for *Psyvariar* [*3*], and then we refined the details through repeated playtests in Japan, incorporating user feedback. When it comes to design and characters, we take a hands-off approach, prioritising the creators' vision.

And how do you feel about the end result?

SN: In my opinion, both Red Art Games and Banana Bytes have created wonderful work.



» [Switch] While all the mainstay game systems of earlier *Psyvariars* will be present in *Psyvariar 3*, we expect many to be significantly expanded.

Jet Set Radio series

ARMED WITH A PAIR OF ROLLERBLADES AND A CAN OF SPRAY PAINT, JET SET RADIO DROPS PLAYERS INTO AN EYE-POPPING REIMAGINING OF TOKYO THAT LOOKS AS FRESH TODAY AS IT DID UPON RELEASE IN 2000. FOR BRITISH COMPOSER RICHARD JACQUES, IT'S A SERIES THAT HAS LONG STAYED CLOSE TO HIS HEART

WORDS BY LIAM HEITMANN-RYCE-LEMERCIER

IN THE KNOW

- **» DEVELOPER:** SMILEBIT
- **» COMPOSER:** RICHARD JACQUES, IN COLLABORATION WITH HIDEKI NAGANUMA
- **» BEST TRACK:** EVERYBODY JUMP AROUND
- **» RELEASE:** 2000/2012 (RERELEASE), 2002 (SEQUEL)
- **» PLATFORM:** SEGA DREAMCAST, VARIOUS
- **» GENRE:** ACTION-ADVENTURE

» [PS Vita] The pulsing score of *Jet Set Radio* effortlessly matched the game's energetic pace and action.

Since its release on the Dreamcast over a quarter of a century ago, Sega's genre-defying, graffiti-based skater game *Jet Set Radio* has grown a passionate following among gamers old and new. Praised for its excellent physics and intuitive controls, the game is perhaps best loved for its kinetic multi-genre soundtrack, fusing an array of styles in a dynamic playlist that mirrors the game's high-octane gameplay.

In collaboration with Japanese artist Hideki Naganuma, British composer Richard Jacques worked on the soundtracks for *Jet Set Radio* and its 2002 sequel *Jet Set Radio Future,* having served as Sega's in-house composer since July 1994. He vividly recalls the day that a work-in-progress copy of the game arrived from Sega Japan. "Everyone was just blown away with the graphics and the gameplay, and the music that Hideki Naganuma had been working on," Richard says excitedly. "Everyone was crowding around this one Japanese Dreamcast that we had in the office and taking turns to play it. It was an incredibly stunning game, both visually and in terms of its gameplay, so it got a lot of attention from everybody in the office!"

Captivated by the game's bold, anime-inspired art style – *Jet Set Radio* has a Guinness World Record as the first videogame release to use cel shading in order to achieve this distinctive aesthetic – it made a huge impact even in its unfinished form.

To Richard's delight a couple of months later, he had been invited to contribute a piece of music to the game's soundtrack. It was a dream project for the classically trained composer with an affinity for hip-hop and funk, with artists like Public Enemy sitting at the top of his CD collection. "I used to go and see a lot of hip-hop artists in London when I was a teenager, so I was very into that scene anyway," he says. "I was a trombone player as well, so I was playing in funk bands and I was DJing, and all this kind of stuff. So if you combine all those things together, my love of jazz and funk and hip-hop, and then this game lands on my doorstep, I'm like, 'Oh yeah, this is absolutely perfect.'"

Given complete creative freedom to produce whatever he felt was appropriate, Richard contributed his funk-infused track *Everybody Jump Around* relatively quickly and then submitted it to Sega Japan. As he recalls, "They absolutely loved it and there were no changes, and it went straight into the game."

This unusually streamlined process was credited not only to *Jet Set Radio*'s highly creative gameplay, even in pre-release form, but the evocative soundtrack that had already

Richard Jacques contributed tracks for *Jet Set Radio* and *Jet Set Radio Future,* in collaboration with lead composer Hideki Naganuma. He remains an in-demand composer today, often pulling in 14-hour days from his South London studio.

» [Dreamcast] *Jet Set Radio* was known in the States as *Jet Grind Radio*.

GET YOUR SKATES ON, MATE!

Richard on Jet Set Radio's speed and fluidity

"I used to be a big ice hockey player when I was a teenager and in my 20s, and then I switched to playing street hockey on rollerblades," Richard tells us. "I don't think I've ever mentioned this before, because I kind of forgot about it! I actually used to be a big-time skater back in the day, around London and Hyde Park."

Richard's keen awareness of the speed and dynamics of street skating is one of the core reasons why he still has such strong affection for *Jet Set Radio* today. The game's physics were perfectly balanced to "just grind rails and pull tricks and jumps" he tells us. "It's relatively easy and an absolute joy to do, whereas some games are very unforgiving with regards to things like that. But in this game, the way the characters skate feels so realistic – and it's such a fun game as well, more than anything."

been produced by Naganuma. With these key guide points, Richard knew exactly what he needed to do. With several years under his belt as Sega's in-house composer, Richard had enjoyed plenty of the company's technological leaps as consoles became more powerful and could store more information.

> "EVERYONE WAS JUST BLOWN AWAY WITH THE GRAPHICS AND THE GAMEPLAY, AND THE MUSIC THAT HIDEKI NAGANUMA HAD BEEN WORKING ON"
> RICHARD JACQUES

As such, by the time the Dreamcast entered production, Richard did not have to contend with the memory limitations that befell many composers of the 16-bit era.

The final console released by Sega, the Dreamcast went on sale in late-1998 and offered CD-quality audio, making it the perfect tool for titles as sonically diverse as *Jet Set Radio*. As Richard asserts, "I wrote the track and it went into the game as is. There were no limitations from a technical standpoint. I was using all of the equipment in my studio, a lot of Akai samplers and drum machines and computer hardware, and things like that. It was done pretty much in a conventional sort of production."

Jet Set Radio generated widespread critical acclaim and took home Best Console Game at the 2000 E3 Game Awards, leaving fans eager to return to the game's eye-catching universe. For the eagerly anticipated sequel, Richard's involvement expanded from one original track to three for the new game's music line-up.

Notably, Richard produced a remix of Naganuma's *Let Mom Sleep*, one of the first tracks from the original game. "He sent me all of the individual audio files, which was amazing to work with," Richard says of his artistic partnership with Naganuma. "I wanted to retain the essence and the flavour of his music, but sort of change it up and present it in a slightly different way."

The two other tracks, meanwhile, had no limitations imposed on them, leaving Richard to take inspiration from the game itself. Unlike the original, *Jet Set Radio Future* presented what Richard considered a slightly darker tone, both in narrative and character. "I wanted to represent that with the music," he explains. "I was trying to keep within the style [of the first game], but to also try and take it to that more futuristic place as well. One of the tracks is called *Bokfresh*, which is another kind of funky, hip-hop track. The other, *What About the Future?*, is quite a dark, electronic break-beat track. I remember reading years ago that someone said that I was the inventor of dubstep, which did make me laugh – and I'm certainly not claiming that I was!" ✱

» [Dreamcast] A later Japanese rerelease called *De La Jet Set Radio* included several songs from the international version of the game.

MARK GRUBER

What would an arcade game be without its big, beautiful and bespoke cabinet? Meet Mark Gruber, who has been designing them for over 30 years at Atari, Global VR and Raw Thrills

Words by Paul Drury

A large part of the arcade experience is the machines themselves. Even when home games were starting to rival coin-ops in terms of on-screen visuals, those hulking cabinets were things to behold, inviting you to sit in them, dance on them or grab a gun and start blasting at those giant screens. For over three decades, Mark Gruber has applied his industrial design skills to immerse gamers in great driving games, from *San Francisco Rush* to *Nitro Trucks*, and some mighty shooters like *Aliens: Extermination* and *Halo: Fireteam Raven*. He remains in the industry at Raw Thrills, which is almost single-handedly keeping the coin-op videogame alive – check out 2025's *Top Gun: Maverick*, which Mark worked on, to see how brightly the flame still burns.

» Mark in his office at Atari in 1992, showing off his new *Space Lords* T-shirt.

You joined Atari in 1992. Had you spent the Eighties playing its games?
I grew up being enamoured of arcade games, but I never thought I'd end up designing them. I had a lot of fun playing them in the arcade in the mall near my house.

How did you get the job at Atari Games?
At the time I was working at a company called Velodyne Acoustics down in San Jose, that made subwoofers. I came across this ad for designing arcade games at Atari and I thought to myself, "Man, that sounds a lot more fun than designing speakers." I was interviewed by Mike Jang and Pete Takaichi, who became my bosses, and as we talked, we discovered we'd all graduated from San Jose State with degrees in Industrial Design. That immediately put me at ease.

How serendipitous! Had you been working in the field of industrial design since graduating?
I'd interned at a place called Taliq Corporation, making liquid crystal displays using polyester film instead of glass, so you could bend and curve them. Then I worked at Gruye Associates in Palo Alto, which was an incredible experience but frustrating to me, as it was mainly exhibit design and I wanted to do product design, though I do remember designing a 486 laptop, which weighed 20 pounds. That thing was heavy. I had to put a handle on it. [Laughs]

The early Nineties was an interesting time to join Atari, as having ruled the roost for much of the Seventies and Eighties, it was going through a difficult time financially.
Well, the week I started they had parties for the 20th anniversary of Atari Games. The whole week was no work! Everybody sat around and talked about old times. There were luncheons, dinners, barbecues… it was crazy. It really didn't seem like they were worried.

Tell us about your first released game, *T-MEK*, which came out in 1994.
I did a couple of little things earlier than that and I spent a lot of time on *Metal Maniax*, which was never released, but *T-MEK* was probably the first one where I did the whole thing. It started as a regular tank game, and then kind of turned into a sci-fi tank game. The first prototype we built was a fully enclosed cabinet, like the chamber of a real tank, and the only entrance was in the middle behind the turret, just like in real life. It was super awesome, but we didn't do it in the end because how would the operators control what the hell was going on in there? [Laughs]

The fog of war! Does the designer or programmer of an arcade game give you a wish list of what they would like the cabinet to look like?
It really depends. Sometimes the team you're dealing with has a clear vision and they hand you something and go, "We want it to look like this." Other times, they'll show you samples of other games that are out there that have some aspect they really like. Sometimes, the artists will have done the in-game art, like, for a vehicle in the game, and they want to have that represented somehow in the cabinet.

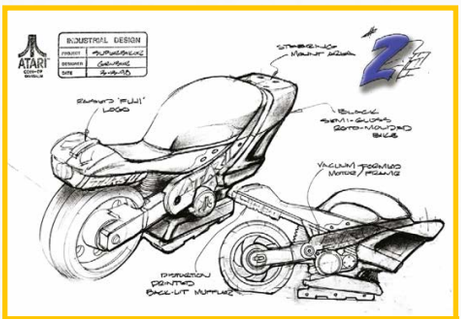
You worked on the first *San Francisco Rush*, released in 1996, and stayed with the series for the rest of your time at Atari.
Driving games at Atari were always long-term projects… and *San Francisco Rush* was super long. John Ray was the head of that team

> “The only way to get people into an arcade is to give them something they can’t get at home. I think about that with every new game design”
>
> Mark Gruber

» [Arcade] Taking in the Parisian skyline on *Blazing Angels*.

SELECTED TIMELINE

- **T-MEK** [ARCADE] 1994
- **WAYNE GRETSKY'S 3D HOCKEY** [ARCADE] 1996
- **SAN FRANCISCO RUSH** [ARCADE] 1996
- **SAN FRANCISCO RUSH: THE ROCK – ALCATRAZ EDITION** [ARCADE] 1996
- **MAXIMUM FORCE** [ARCADE] 1997
- **VAPOR TRX** [ARCADE] 1998
- **ROAD BURNERS** [ARCADE] 1999
- **SAN FRANCISCO RUSH 2049** [ARCADE] 1999
- **NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERGROUND** [ARCADE] 2005
- **ALIENS: EXTERMINATION** [ARCADE] 2006
- **EA SPORTS NASCAR RACING** [ARCADE] 2007
- **BLAZING ANGELS** [ARCADE] 2008
- **NEED FOR SPEED: CARBON** [ARCADE] 2008
- **NASCAR TEAM RACING** [ARCADE] 2010
- **BATMAN [ARCADE]** 2013
- **JURASSIC PARK** [ARCADE] 2015
- **THE WALKING DEAD** [ARCADE] 2016
- **X-GAMES SNOWBOARDER** [ARCADE] 2017
- **HALO: FIRETEAM RAVEN** [ARCADE] 2018
- **NITRO TRUCKS** [ARCADE] 2020
- **TOP GUN: MAVERICK** [ARCADE] 2025



» Mark's concept art, dated March 1998, for *Superbikes*, which was retitled *Road Burners* after Atari failed to secure that name.

» Mark sitting proudly in one of his creations at the Atari factory in 1996.

» Various models Mark produced for *San Francisco Rush*, a series he'd work on for much of his time at Atari Games.

and he's the best team leader I've ever had. I did concepts [for the cabinet] early on and then went on to other games before coming back to the project.

Were you a fan of the genre?
I think racing games are one of the coolest to do because done right, people sit down and just feel comfortable. It looks easy to do but you've got to mount the seat right, think about the steering wheel, the shifter, the screen itself, being able to get in and out… all those things make a difference.

Driving games have been around since videogames began, so how did you go about making *San Francisco Rush* stand out from its competitors in terms of cabinet design?
We decided we weren't just going to do a roto-moulded seat, we were going to do a roto-moulded bezel, something to cover the screen. Once we decided that, Mike [Jang] and I looked at it in a different way, like, let's incorporate the control panel and the marquee with it, too. What I always liked about *Race Drivin'* [1990] was that feeling of enclosure and that was our vision for *San Francisco Rush*. We made the bezel kind of lean over and we put handles on it, so it felt like you were getting into a real car.

» [Arcade] *San Francisco Rush* offered the chance for some virtual tourism at breathtaking speed.

How did you go about making prototypes of your concepts for cabinets?
We had the luxury of having a full metal and wood shop. When we got something we liked, we made it! It was beautiful because Connie Ozuna, the head of the woodworking shop, could make anything. We could get the first protos of metal and wood parts the next day if needed. It was crazy fast. I mean, now we wait weeks for protos to be made…

The quick turnaround must have allowed you to iterate your cabinet designs.
Oh yeah. We could start with the seat and then experiment with the position of the steering wheel… I remember for *San Francisco Rush*, the shifter was the hardest thing to incorporate. I always like the shift stick down below, not up on the control panel, but we had to make sure you didn't goose yourself on it getting in and out of the cabinet [laughs].

Raw thrills indeed. How were you designing the cabinets – hand-drawn sketches or were you using a software package?
At Atari, I always started with a sketch. That's the way all design should be, because it gives you a freedom that CAD [Computer Aided Design] tools can't. Then I'd bring that sketch into AutoCAD, which was the standard 2D CAD drafting program that everyone used at the time. I'd used it at my previous jobs before Atari, so I was very familiar with it. That would give me a framework, and I could put real dimensions on to my design. Then you could make a crude mock-up in foam core.

Foam core?
It's what surfboards are made from. If you're going to make a moulded plastic part, that

» *Blazing Angels* began as a console game and Mark's cab design shows his desire to give gamers something they couldn't get at home.

» *T-MEK* allowed up to four players to link up in-game, a fairly new feature in 1994.

> "At Atari, I always started with a sketch. That's the way all design should be, because it gives you a freedom that CAD tools can't"
> Mark Gruber

means an investment in custom steel or aluminium tooling – metal parts used to make the plastic parts. Tooling can be expensive and will produce thousands of parts, so you should make sure they're perfect before releasing them. You don't want any mistakes! Because of our proto shop, I could make a wood cabinet and glue pieces of surfboard on to it to mock-up the way I wanted the final cabinet to look like.

It seems like a very hands-on process.
Yeah, it was, but soon after *San Francisco Rush*, I started using SolidWorks, which is real 3D modelling, and I never looked back. Nowadays you can just sketch something and the computer turns it into a 3D file, but back then, that definitely wasn't the case. I kind of miss that connection, you know?

When you first saw the *San Francisco Rush* cabinet you had designed coming off the production line, how did it feel?
Just amazing but you're also scared as hell.

Really? Why?
Oh, I was afraid every time one of my games went into production. You really feel it. You build your prototype and you know it all fits together but just because you've got all your drawings right, doesn't mean a vendor makes it right all the time. And there's always other stuff that comes up. I have a lot of scared memories of *San Francisco Rush*. It started off as a simple one-player driving game, which was going to be built in the Atari factory next to the building where I worked in Milpitas [California], then, boom, Midway buys us and now it's going to be built in Chicago. They made five new roto-moulds for the seat and the bezel, which sounds great, but roto-moulding is a very crude process, and every one of those tools was slightly different, so every part would be slightly different… I remember having to jump on a plane and take a red-eye into Chicago because they just weren't fitting together. I walked into the building and, man, everybody's looking at me funny and I hear yelling going on in the background offices [laughs].

Did you save the day, Mark?
We ended up making some adjustments to the glass and the plastic round the monitor and we were good to go. They had just jumped into production too fast. It was already a hit game and they couldn't make them fast enough.

You also worked on the 1995 game *Area 51* and its 1997 follow-up, *Maximum Force*. What are the particular challenges of working on a lightgun game?
With a gun game, my input was more conceptual, like, with *Area 51*, I designed the prototype, so the guns were on the side and put a big speaker in the middle. I really wanted you to hear that gun! That didn't go into production. Honestly, because the guns were all hard-wired and connected to the cabinet with a big cable, that limited what you could do. Targeting was easy because we used CRTs then, as big as 39 inches, and the light guns used existing scanning feedback for targeting. When we went to LCDs, that all went out of the window. There was a whole new targeting problem to solve.

Did you have any qualms about working on a gun game?

FIVE TO PLAY

Great arcade cabinets from the drawing board of Mark Gruber

T-MEK

■ Mark's first released game at Atari was this futuristic update of *Battlezone* – the original vector game from 1980 even features in a hidden area. Climbing into the hulking cabinet really gets you in the mood for some hover-tank blasting.

SAN FRANCISCO RUSH

■ Mark worked on the first in this series which allows you to 'do a Steve McQueen' on the streets of San Francisco. He went on to do many fine driving games, but this one will always have a special place in his heart – and ours.

ALIENS: EXTERMINATION

■ At Global VR, Mark worked on various *Need For Speed* titles and also this atmospheric blaster, which casts you as a Colonial Marine, determined to wipe out the alien scum that decimated your buddies.

HALO: FIRETEAM RAVEN

■ This colossal cabinet is the biggest thing Mark has worked on in his long career. The four-player deluxe *Halo: Fireteam Raven* is a joy to play together with three mates, if you're lucky enough to find an arcade big enough to house it.

TOP GUN: MAVERICK

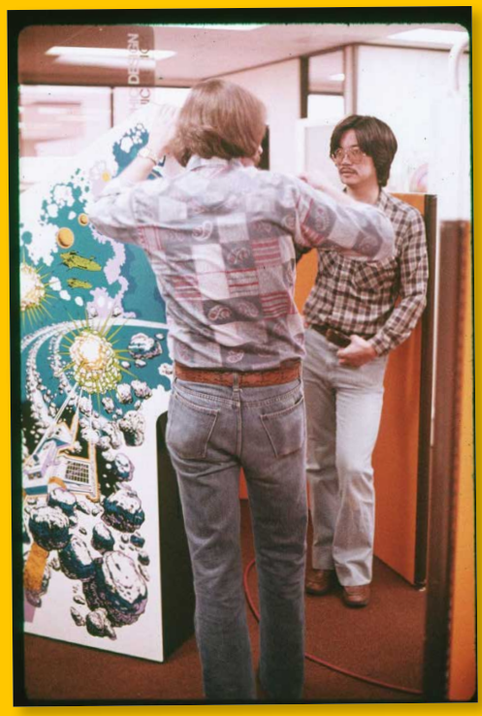
■ One of Mark's more recent projects at Raw Thrills, this intense, fast-paced air combat simulator boasts a flight stick, throttle controller and a moving cockpit seat. If you grew up playing Sega's superb *After Burner* in the arcades in the Eighties, this should make you smile.

» [Arcade] Mark worked on *Maximum Force*, the follow up to *Area 51*, and the experience prepared him well for future lightgun titles.

REMEMBERING MIKE JANG

Mark on working with the Atari legend

■ "Mike Jang was head of industrial design and my boss at Atari during my time there," explains Mark. "He was a great guy. He was a free sketcher, who could just take a concept, do a sketch, look at it and go, "Yeah that's cool,' and he wouldn't need to do any more. I, on the other hand, would need to draw it up and think about it in multiple different ways to put something together that I'd be okay to show people, but not Mike." Mike had joined Atari in the mid-Seventies and was responsible for the *Hard Drivin'* sit-down cabinet, the futuristic bike of *STUN Runner*, the elongated *RoadBlasters* machine and the iconic *Star Wars* cockpit cab, amongst many others. He sadly passed away in 2024. You can read about his incredible contribution to Atari's coin-op division at arcadeblogger.com



» Mike Jang [right] discussing *Asteroids Deluxe* with fellow designer Dave Cook.

Atari was a special place because once a year we would go off-site and have these brainstorming sessions. We would come up with some great ideas for games, but I remember multiple times ideas being killed because 'we didn't want a gun game, not another gun game'… and then we made *Area 51* and it was really successful. [Laughs]

> "Ever since consoles came out, we've been talking about the arcade business being on the downturn, so I'm fascinated by still being able to do arcade games to this day"
> Mark Gruber

One of your lesser-known games from that time is *Vapor TRX*, a futuristic racing game released in 1998.
That was the last game I did using AutoCAD before everything was done in SolidWorks. I remember it started as trying to do something using the *Star Wars* controller, but the one that ended up on the game was designed by a guy at Midway in Chicago and it was pretty crappy. Midway ended up using it on their game, *Hyperdrive*, at the same time, so basically, Atari Games and Midway, who owned us, came out with the same kind of game and they competed with each other. That didn't make any sense to some of us.

***Vapor TRX* does remind us of *WipEout*, which came out on the PlayStation and Saturn a few years earlier. As home consoles became more powerful, were you conscious of trying to give gamers something they couldn't experience at home?**
I've been trying to do that forever [laughs]. Since I started in the industry, I remember people saying, "The only way to get people into an arcade is to give them something they can't get at home." I think about that with every new game design.

Sitting on a full-sized motorbike would be an example of something you can't usually do in your own home. When you designed the *Road Burners* cab, did you actually bring a bike into the studio?
[Laughs] No, I just did a lot of research and sketched up a lot of ideas. I had a dirt bike then and Ralph Perez, who was our product designer, had a nice Harley. It was the first game I did using SolidWorks that went into production. It was a real headache because the bike pivots left and right [to steer] and so you have all these places where people can stick their fingers, and you have to somehow cover up all those pinch points.

» [Arcade] *Vapor TRX* obviously riffs on *WipEout*, a sign that the balance of power between arcade and home titles was shifting in the late-Nineties.

Ouch! What constraints do you have when designing a cab? Money, size, durability, perhaps?
It was mostly about the money. I'm fortunate enough to still be making games in this business and there's a lot more money spent on them now than there was back then. That's nice, but I got to tell you, when you know you can't spend a lot of money, I think you get more creative about stuff.

Did you ever design a feature for a cab which you thought was cool but had to be scrapped?
Atari was ruled by committee. When you released a product, the mechanical engineer, the product engineer, the industrial designer, the product producer of the game and the head of design services had to sign off on every fabricated part. Everybody had responsibility and I think that kind of limited how crazy we could get.

» The mighty *Halo: Fireteam Raven* cab, the biggest machine Mark has ever worked on.

» [Arcade] Raw Thrills have produced many arcade titles based on film and TV licences – *The Walking Dead* is one of our favourites.

You left Atari in 2001. What prompted that?
Midway shut us down and I lost my job. I had been working on a game called *Nitro*, which was a freaking cool driving game, with John Ray as team leader. I'd learned how to use a program called Maya and had become an artist, designing some of the cars for the game. That gave me a real appreciation for in-game stuff, but I have to say, I missed the real world. It was bizarre to sit there and do these things that were 3D, but they only existed in this computer space. It definitely wasn't as satisfying. I found the software nothing but frustrating. At least when real-world stuff doesn't work, you can see it in front of you [laughs]. Then they killed the game and it was just a sad time.

You stayed in the arcade business, joining Global VR, and worked on several *Need For Speed* titles.
Yeah, and there's a link with Atari. Very shortly after joining Global VR, they said they wanted a deluxe driving game, so I basically resurrected *Hot Rod Rebels*, a game that was supposed to be the next generation of *San Francisco Rush* and was super cool but got cancelled. That cabinet became the first Global VR *Need for Speed* cabinet.

Did EA have much involvement in the arcade versions of its franchises?
Not much. Our games did have to meet a certain standard so they must have had some say but the main thing I remember is that every game we made of theirs, we had to ship them a machine so they could put it in the EA offices for everyone to play [laughs].

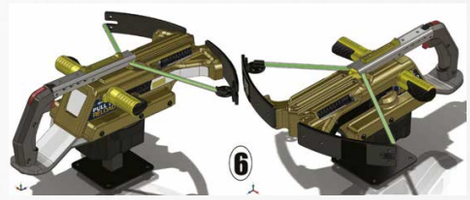
Have you a favourite project from your time at Global VR?
I'd have to say *Need For Speed: Carbon*. I was able to use the side plastic of the *NASCAR* game I'd done and put a cool decal on the side of it and a brand-new marquee up on top that looked like the front end of a car. *Aliens: Extermination* was a fun game, too. The gun felt really nice… actually, that gun was a mash-up of the M1 rifle in *Aliens* the movie and the Uzi used for *Area 51*. When I left Atari, I kind of took the plastic casting of a real Uzi we'd had made…

Your secret is safe with us Mark. You've been working at Raw Thrills, the company founded by Eugene Jarvis of *Defender* and *Robotron* fame, since 2011. Are you surprised to still be making coin-ops in 2026?
Ever since consoles came out, we've been talking about the arcade business being on the downturn, how it's never going to come back, so I'm fascinated by still being able to do arcade games to this day.

We loved playing *Halo: Fireteam Raven*. That cabinet is huge.
I'm glad you liked it. That four-player deluxe cabinet is the biggest thing I've ever done. It's 10-feet long, 10-feet deep with two 85-inch displays… it's kind of crazy.

Looking back over your lengthy career, do you think cabinet designers like yourself are valued enough for their contribution to the arcade experience?
I guess it depends on what you call 'valued'. I never felt like people didn't appreciate what I did. Arcade games are special because it's something you can't get at home. There are a lot of creative people at Raw Thrills and there are still cool things we can do. If my involvement can make a difference, I would feel very proud. ✱

Thanks to Mark for providing behind the scenes material and Tony Temple for additional images.

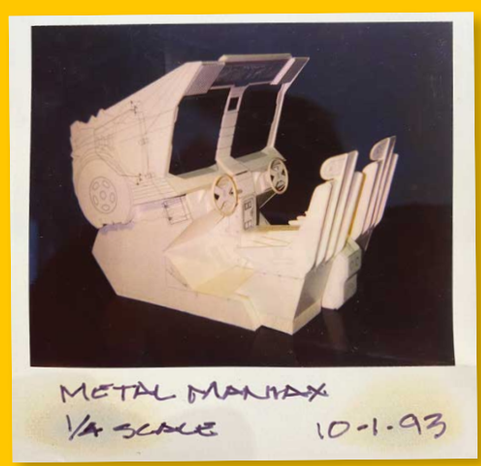


» Mark's design for the meaty crossbow that adorns *The Walking Dead* cabinet.

DEATH METAL

When games get cancelled

■ Anyone who has spent any length of time in the videogame industry will know that having a project cancelled sadly comes with the territory. For Mark, the disappointment of seeing his work make it to the prototype stage but not into actual production came early. "I spent a lot of time on a driving game called *Metal Maniax* in my first few years at Atari," he explains. "The cabinet was pretty cool and really wide. The upper half of the side panel had the cutout of a car that was kind of crunched." The machine also featured seats that moved with the action and the word 'Carmageddon' appeared on the side art, rather presciently, as the hit PC game of the same name wasn't released until 1997, three years after the *Metal Maniax* prototype was put out on test. The gameplay followed the 'destruction derby' model of vehicular combat but the sluggish framerate meant the game was poorly received during field testing and only ten prototype cabinets are believed to have been produced. Mike Hally, who worked on the project, is rumoured to have one, so we contacted him to find out the truth. "Mark Gruber is a super talented guy and a good friend of mine," he replied. "I believe we built four preproduction twin units with the light tower. Great game design but yeah, the hardware lacked in game framerate. Scott Evans, a serious collector, has a working one." You'll also find one at Arcade Dungeon in Alamogordo, New Mexico, if you're ever out that way.



» Mark created a quarter scale foam core model of the proposed *Metal Maniax* cab, using white O-rings for the steering wheels.

Final Fight One

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE GAME BOY

» GAME BOY ADVANCE » 1989 » SUN-TEC

My most questionable hardware buy is probably the Game Boy Micro. I'd hankered after one ever since it was announced in 2005. The Game Boy is my favourite handheld, so I had to have the final model, the last in the line. I also loved the quirkiness of the device and how it was released *after* its successor, the DS, had already come out. What a Nintendo move.

It was tiny though, wasn't it? The Micro wouldn't just fit in your pocket, it could get lost in there among the loose coins and open Airwaves packets. But until I bought one, I didn't realise just how tiny. It feels okay in your hands, but the screen is so small, just 2-inches. While this does mean the pixel density is high, making the display nice and sharp, that counts for nowt if your aging eyes can't actually see what's going on. Trying to play *Super Mario World* (OK, *Super Mario Advance 2*) on it was painful, so platformers were out. I started thinking about what would play okay on it – and that led me straight to this classic brawler.

The original *Final Fight* arcade game memorably featured hulking great characters that filled the screen (apparently, the game's character designer Akira Yasuda was influenced by Taito's 1986 coin-op *Gladiator*, which broke new ground with the size of its characters). The result is a game that works well and looks lovely on any display – including the Micro's mini-screen. As an added benefit, Sun-Tec's GBA version just happens to be an excellent conversion. It's not just a straight port of the earlier SNES release, which only featured two out of the three playable characters, dropped an entire stage (Industrial Area) and lacked co-op play. The GBA version reinstates most of the missing content and supports two players via the link cable.

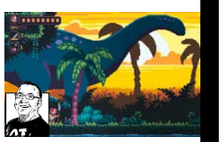
Final Fight One remains my go-to game on the Micro (which, incidentally, lives in my car glove box these days). You could say it's the perfect pick-up-and-pummel game. As brawlers are well suited to the system I'd also highly recommend *Double Dragon Advance*, *Jackie Chan Adventures: Legend Of The Dark Hand* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2007). Just don't forget your glasses. ✱

JAKE

RETRORATED

» This month we tackle the latest compilation from Limited Run Games, find out if Bungie's reboot of *Marathon* was worth the wait and read about Mario's history. We also play the latest *Mega Man* collection and find out if the *Super Mario Bros Wonder* upgrade is actually worth picking up

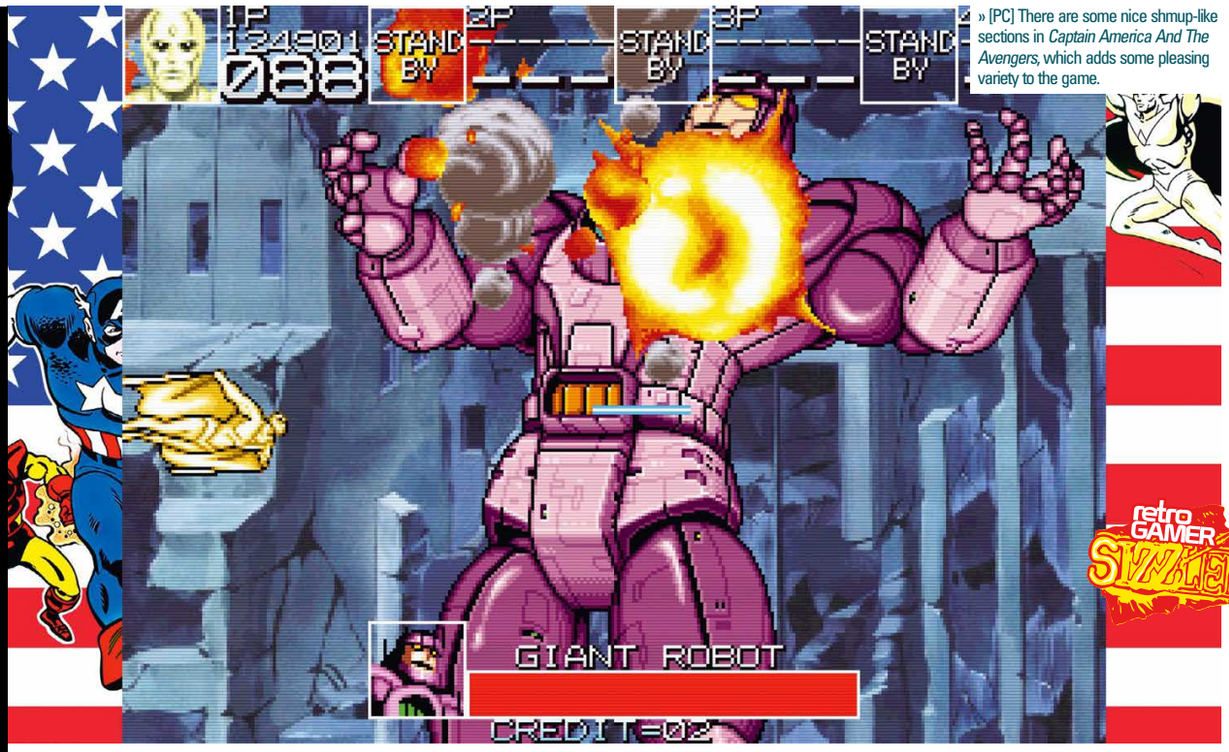
★PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Primal Planet
Yes it came out late last year, but this is a really entertaining Metroidvania.

MARTYN
Super Mario Bros Wonder: Meetup At Bellapel Park
I've revisited the main game on Switch 2, grabbing all the stuff I missed the first time.

TIM
Final Fantasy IV
A few of the *Pixel Remasters* are up on Game Pass so I've been hammering through them.



» [PC] There are some nice shmup-like sections in *Captain America And The Avengers*, which adds some pleasing variety to the game.

retro GAMER SWAGGER

Marvel MaXimum Collection

HAVE LIMITED RUN GAMES PUT IN MAXIMUM EFFORT?

INFORMATION

- **SYSTEM:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PLAYSTATION 5, SWITCH, SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW (PHYSICAL OCTOBER 2025)
- **PRICE:** £19.99 (DIGITAL), £29.99+ (PHYSICAL)
- **PUBLISHER:** CLEAR RIVER GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** LIMITED RUN GAMES
- **PLAYERS:** 1-6

» [PC] We much prefer *Spider-Man/Venom: Maximum Carnage* because it's a lot easier than *Separation Anxiety*.

Few Japanese companies embrace their retro heritage like Konami does.

While the publisher's recent output is often mixed, it has at least been making its games available, which in this day and age, is very pleasing to see. After teaming up with Limited Run Games to release several of its *Rocket Knight* games, Konami has now given the developer access to its numerous *Marvel* games that were released during the Nineties.

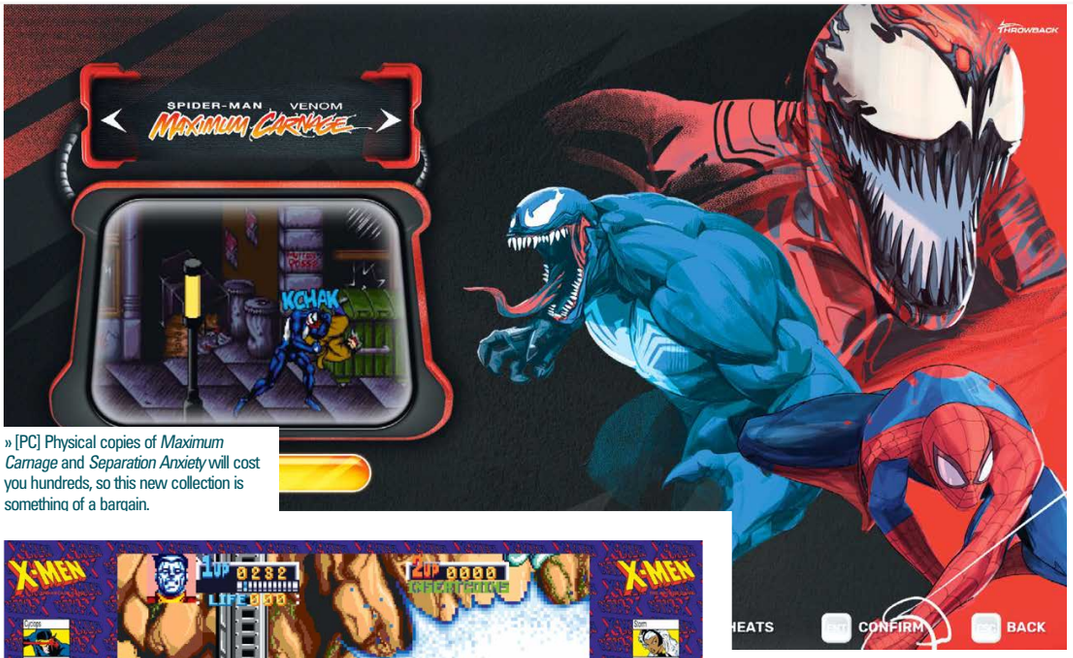
There are six games in total and they range in quality from great to terrible, so let's have a quick rundown of what has been included, starting with the best. Konami made some great scrolling fighters back in the day and *X-Men: The Arcade Game* is one of its best. It's a gloriously entertaining romp with a host of iconic villains to duff up and six playable characters to master. Each brawler has a good range of moves, there's some extremely funky music and Limited Run has included the option to play online with Rollback Netcode.

You can't have highs without lows, so let's discuss *Silver Surfer*, easily the worst game that's been included. It's essentially a shmup with a bland selection of power-ups, ropey collision detection and a stupidly high difficulty level. It adds some variety but there is little here to keep you playing.

Several *Spider-Man* games have also been included and *Spider-Man/X-Men: Arcade's Revenge* is arguably the most interesting. Once you get past the first awful

BRIEF HISTORY

» Konami released two *Marvel*-themed arcade games during the Nineties, while Sculptured Software developed a number of *Marvel*-themed games during the same period for the 8-bit and 16-bit consoles. Interestingly, *Wolverine*, Sculptured Software's NES game, hasn't been included here, most likely due to licensing reasons.



» [PC] Physical copies of *Maximum Carnage* and *Separation Anxiety* will cost you hundreds, so this new collection is something of a bargain.

» [PC] *X-Men: The Arcade Game* is the best offering on this collection by a wide margin. Just be mindful it can be hard to find online games at times.

level that features Spider-Man dismantling bombs, you'll be able to flip between a variety of heroes who each have their own distinct levels. It's rather entertaining and includes the SNES, Mega Drive, Master System and Game Gear versions of the game.

The next two *Spider-Man* games are both scrolling fighters and are most likely the main reason why many will be eyeing this collection up. *Spider-Man/Venom: Maximum Carnage* and *Venom/Spider-Man: Separation Anxiety* are not cheap games to buy, making their inclusion on this compilation very welcome. They're a little unbalanced to play compared to the featured arcade games, but they're still decent fun, particularly *Maximum Carnage*.

Captain America And The Avengers is another side-scrolling fighter, but there's no online play for this one. It's a reasonable brawler, and we like how the dinky sprites allow for some great bosses, while the occasional deviation from the standard scrapping is also welcome. The Mega Drive and Master System versions are also fine to play, but they're obviously not a patch on the arcade original.

As with previous Limited Run releases, this uses the Carbon Engine for emulation and it's of a very good quality. There are also plenty of quality-of-life extras including rewind options, save states, several display options and multiple versions of several of the games. Some games also have built-in cheat options that let you change the number of lives or the level you start on, like *X-Men: The Arcade Game*. It all feels very comprehensive and that includes the museum side as well.

While there are no in-depth documentaries like in the recent *Bubsy Collection* that Limited Run released, you do get a large number of playing manuals, adverts, box art and an exceptionally vast music library. It's a shame that some of the games feature more extra material than others, but that's the nature of games preservation.

Marvel MaXimum Collection is ultimately a rather interesting compilation as it's much more than the sum of its individual parts. Very few of these games were critically acclaimed on release and they're now desirable due to their rarity rather than their overall quality.

Silver Surfer aside, we've still enjoyed our time with *Marvel MaXimum Collection*, the quality of the emulation is good, the archive has plenty to dig through and some of the games are great fun with friends. The physical release is a long way away right now, but it's hard to argue with the current £20 asking price. ✱

In a nutshell

While the quality of the games is mixed, it's well presented and there's a decent amount of content included.

>> Score **70%**

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

SPIDER-MAN (MEGA DRIVE)

▼ SOMETHING NEW

MARVEL VS CAPCOM FIGHTING COLLECTION: ARCADE CLASSICS (PC)

» [PC] *Silver Surfer* is as bad as everyone says, which is a shame as it adds some welcome variety.

» [PC] Most of the console games feature high-quality scans of the manuals, which is a nice touch.

» [PC] Get past the weak opening level and you'll find *Spider-Man/X-Men: Arcade's Revenge* to be good fun across all the available versions.

✱ PICK OF THE MONTH

Marathon

retro GAMER SYNKER

CAN BUNGIE'S SCI-FI SHOOTER MAINTAIN THE PACE?

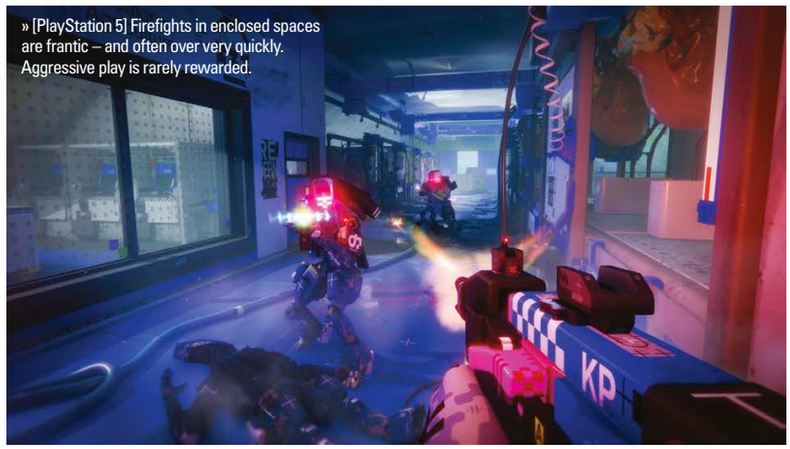
INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** PLAYSTATION 5
- **ALSO ON:** XBOX SERIES S/X, PC
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £34.99+
- **PUBLISHER:** BUNGIE
- **DEVELOPER:** BUNGIE
- **PLAYERS:** 18 PER MATCH

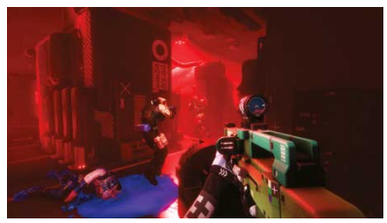
***Marathon* comes burdened with a weight of expectation not usually seen on a game without a numeral after its title.** This is a sci-fi FPS from Bungie, after all, and that means lineage: *Destiny*, *Halo* and the original *Marathon* series that made a rocket-sized dent on Apple Macs back in the Nineties. That rich history draws **Retro Gamer**'s critical eye and right now, we're impressed.

If you imagine the new *Marathon* would have little in common with the original, you'd be right. Mostly. This is a multiplayer extraction shooter that's focussed on PvP and PvE gameplay. Besides a delightful tutorial-dressed-up-as-a-mission, there's no traditional single-player campaign, and that means no unfolding narrative this time around. Deep series lore already exists, of course, with the story taking place a century after the original, but that's just a backdrop for the battles and skirmishes. Different player styles are catered for by 'shells' – Destroyer, Assassin, Recon, Thief and so on – that offer individual abilities and traits. Experimenting with the shells is essential, because *Marathon* is far from forgiving. The core three-player squad battles see you dropped in at the deep end as you go up against rival teams and hostile bots. The basic idea is to scavenge and escape via the extraction point, taking your valuable loot with you, and it quickly becomes apparent that a restrained, cautious approach is required. While the game is clearly built around three-player squads, stealthy solo play proves to be the best way to discover *Marathon*. Stop, look and (crucially) listen.

Where the game expertly distils what's gone before can be seen in its combat. The controls and the gunplay are so satisfying, having been honed since the original *Marathon*. Everything just feels weighty and right. Combat evolved, you could say. The game also features a striking art style, as you'd expect from a Bungie shooter. Stark, washed-out landscapes contrast sharply with neon-lit interiors. It really looks lovely. The user interface is also beautiful, but here it proves to be a case of form over functionality. Navigating the menus is a faff, particularly at first, and it seems to take longer sorting your loadout than play an actual round.



» [PlayStation 5] Firefights in enclosed spaces are frantic – and often over very quickly. Aggressive play is rarely rewarded.



» [PlayStation 5] Neon lights illuminate interiors, giving the sci-fi theme a nicely atmospheric, even sinister feeling.

Considering the game itself can be so unforgiving, it's a shame you have to fight with the UI as well.

The UI will no doubt be tweaked, and indeed the whole game will evolve over time in line with the live service model, introducing new areas, new shells, new modes, new challenges. And this is where the real pressure on *Marathon* lies: not in its past, but its future. Has Bungie done enough to attract and maintain a player base that will keep the game alive? The developer has promised it's in it for the long haul, aiming to deliver "many years of steady improvements to every aspect of the game", but if the figures don't stack up then this won't happen. As it stands, Bungie has created a compelling game world populated with everything required to keep those neon lights switched on. ✱

In a nutshell

A slick extraction shooter built on Bungie's decades of FPS experience. It looks great and plays even better – although perseverance is required.

Score 90%

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
MARATHON (1994) (MAC)

▼ SOMETHING NEW
ARC RAIDERS (PLAYSTATION 5)

✱ BRIEF HISTORY

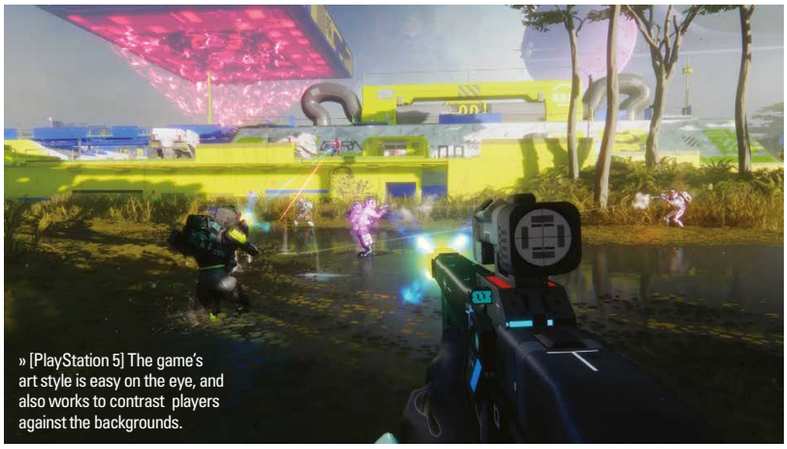
» The new game is actually the fourth in Bungie's *Marathon* series. The first three were released in 1994, 1995 and 1996, primarily for the Apple Mac (the second game was also released for PC and later Xbox 360). Look out for a full series retrospective in **RG** very soon.

✱ GO DEEPER

The facts behind Marathon

» The game was announced in 2023, drawing attention for being the first new Bungie project since the launch of the *Destiny* series in 2014 – and also the first under its new owners, Sony.

» *Marathon* was alpha-tested for two weeks in 2025. Player feedback was lukewarm and Bungie chose to delay the game indefinitely to address issues. It was eventually released in March 2026.



» [PlayStation 5] The game's art style is easy on the eye, and also works to contrast players against the backgrounds.

YOUR GAME IS NOT OVER

CONTINUE?

[Y]/[Y]

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★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Saint Slayer: Spear Of Sacrilege

» **System:** PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X » **Buy it for:** £8.39+ » **Buy it from:** Online

When Father Pacer begins stealing Catholic relics and murdering innocents, it's down to the farmer Rudigar to embrace his military past and seek out justice for those that have fallen.

Saint Slayer is an entertaining old-school platformer that's clearly inspired by Konami's *Castlevania* series. It utilises a similar look to the original NES games, but adds additional polish and visual tricks that an actual NES would have struggled with. The end result is a slick, if tough, adventure that sees Rudigar increase in power as he reclaims various items, including the titular spear.

The original NES *Castlevania*s certainly weren't easy and *Saint Slayer* follows this trend, a little too slavishly perhaps. Normal difficulty and higher feature the same frustrating knock-back mechanic that could make the *Castlevania* games so divisive, while the bosses offer a steep learning curve too. It's a little too easy on the first few levels of Easy, but it does allow you to better learn Rudigar's numerous abilities, which include using the spear to bounce across dangerous objects and a super-useful powerslide.

Aside from the off-putting difficulty, the game itself looks lovely with some rather nice-looking sprite design, beautifully detailed backgrounds and imposing-looking bosses that often tower over poor Rudigar. The chiptune soundtrack is equally good, delivering intense, punchy beats.

One aspect of *Saint Slayer* that does stand out is the sheer variety on offer as Rudigar attempts his epic quest. One minute you're racing up a rotating tower, the next you're rowing a boat across tentacle-infested waters or leaping across carriages as your horse thunders through the night. There's a lot of diversity to *Saint Slayer*, so it's something of a shame that its high difficulty may stop some from seeing everything it has to offer.

>> **Score 76%**

» [PC] There's a hell of a lot of gore in *Saint Slayer*, luckily, the pixels soften it somewhat.

» [PC] This section becomes a lot tougher on the higher difficulty levels, as Rudigar can easily get knocked off.

Super Mario Bros Wonder – Switch 2 Upgrade Pack

» **System:** Switch 2 » **Buy it for:** £66.99 (full game), £16.99 (upgrade) » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

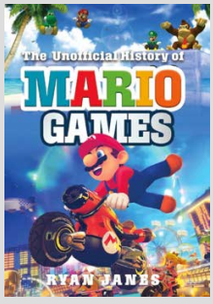
There are two parts to this Switch 2 edition. The already gorgeous-looking base game benefits from a display boost to 4K HDR (when docked) and there's some fresh new content – the highlight being remixed stages that end with entertaining boss battles with the returning Koopalings. Then there's *Meetup In Bellabel Park*, which serves up a bunch of local and online multiplayer party games. Think *Mario Party* lite. Very lite. A more focussed update to the main game, perhaps adding a new world or two, would have been preferable. Still, *Super Mario Bros Wonder* remains an amazing 2D *Mario* game. Our rating is for the Switch 2 upgrade alone.

MARTYN CARROLL

>> **Score 70%**

The Unofficial History Of Mario Games

» **Buy it from:** pen-and-sword.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £29.99



Mario is surely the most important videogame character ever created. By our reckoning, if you take the best 100 games ever made, he's in about half of them. This book rounds-up more than 200 games featuring Mario, from the huge mainline series entries to the 'brand extensions' where he pops up for a few seconds. And here's the problem – the cameo appearances and minor entries take up too much space, and should have all been rounded up in a mini feature. It would have also helped to see a few quotes from Shigeru Miyamoto and others weaved into the commentary. And some box art would have been nice as well. Despite this, author Ryan Janes writes in an entertaining, reflective style, and the book succeeded in prompting us to check out some of Mario's more obscure adventures.

MARTYN CARROLL

Mega Man Star Force Legacy Collection

» **System:** PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it for:** £32.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online

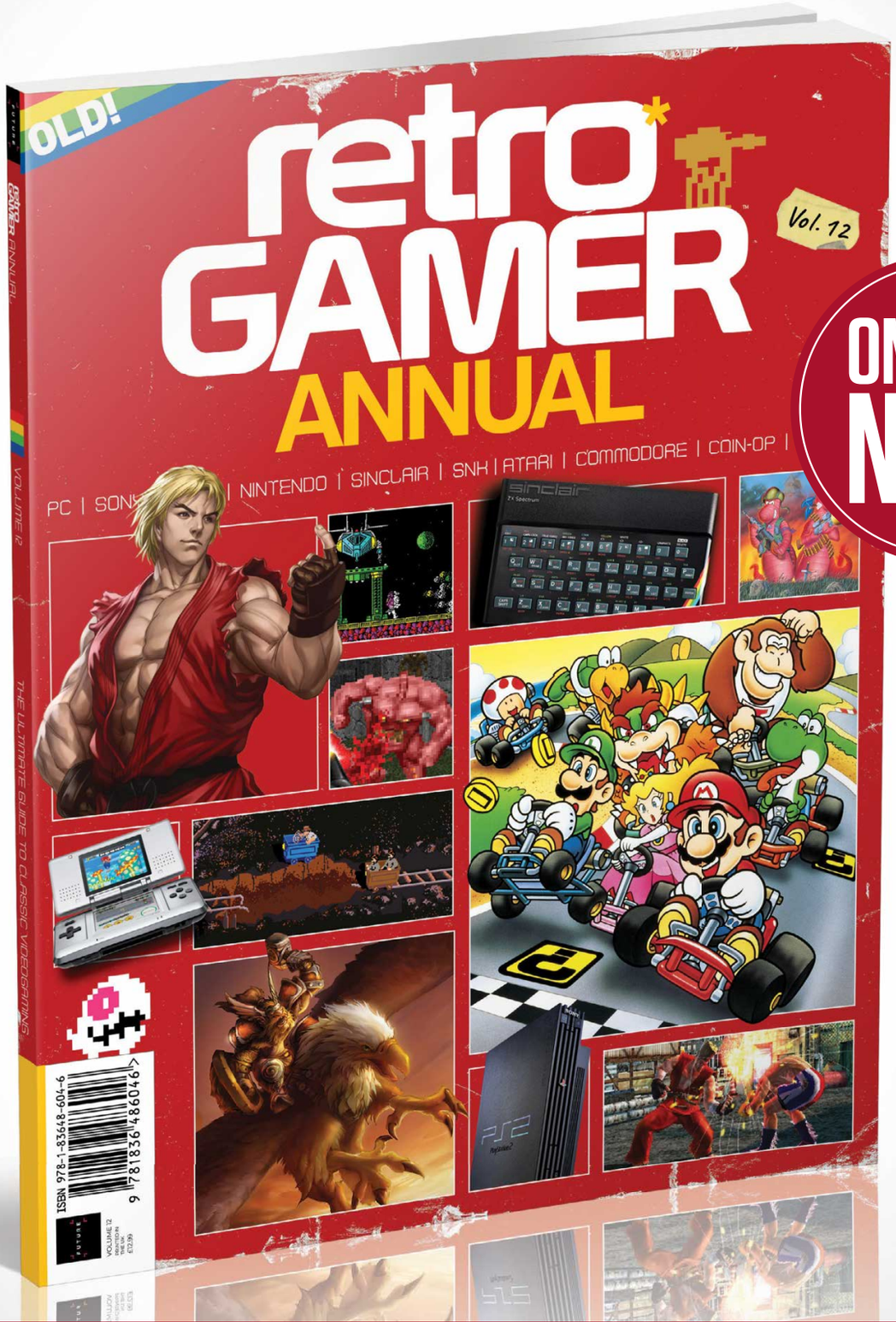
Capcom's latest compilation converts seven DS *Mega Man* games to modern consoles, continuing the card battling mechanics of the GBA's *Battle Network* series. Whilst the card combat isn't quite as inventive as in the GBA releases, there's still plenty to enjoy here across the three core games (like *Pokémon*, each game has different variants). Capcom has done an extremely good job adapting the dual-screen play of the original console to a single screen, while there's plenty of vault material to get stuck into. There's admittedly not a lot of variety between the included games, but they still hold up well.

DARRAN JONES

>> **Score 73%**

CELEBRATE THE BEST OF RETRO GAMING IN 2025

Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!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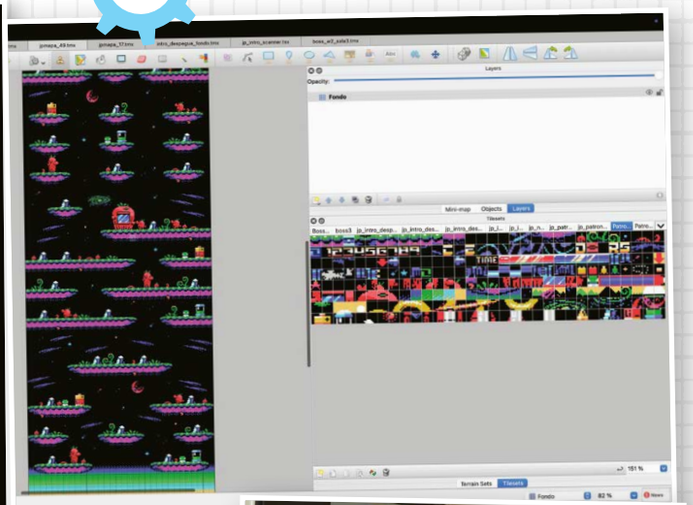
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>

<!--- [MSX] AN EARLY VERSION OF ROCKETMAN FEATURED TURQUOISE SKIES. --->



<!--- HERE YOU CAN SEE THE WORLD 4 TILES BEING EDITED. --->

<!--- PART OF THE RENOVATIO TEAM (LEFT TO RIGHT): DANI TEAR, DANIEL PERUJO, TONI GALVEZ, AND GABRIEL CAFFARENA. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

ROCKETMAN REVEALED

<INTRO> DANI TEAR OF RENOVATIO RETRO GAMES STUDIO BRINGS US THE STORY OF ROCKETMAN, THE TEAM'S BRILLIANT NEW MSX GAME </INTRO>

<INTRO> WE TRY TO BRING YOU THE CREAM OF THE HOMEBREW CROP, AND THAT MEANS THREE GREAT GAMES ARE REVIEWED THIS MONTH – WITH THE NEWS THAT ROGUECRAFT DX WILL ALSO BE CONVERTED TO THE SPECTRUM NEXT (THALAMUS.LINK/ROGUEDX-NEXT) BY COLIN REED. OUR CHAMPION CODER REVEALS MORE ABOUT HIS BRILLIANT SPECTRUM 48K SHMUP, AND WE PREVIEW A SUPERB AMSTRAD RACING GAME. OUR MAIN FEATURE IS A GREAT NEW MSX GAME THAT IS LAUNCHING SOON, SO READ ON. </INTRO>

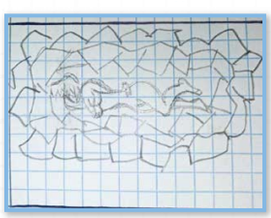
<BODY> **Inspiration for Renovatio Retro Games Studio's latest title came from a Spectrum classic, Dani Tear reveals.** "When I was 12, I went to a neighbour's house, and we spent the whole afternoon playing *Jetpac*. In 2017, I became friends with people who programmed MSX games. I decided to create an MSX game inspired by *Jetpac*, taking advantage of the MSX's strengths."

Jetpac wasn't the only title to influence *Rocketman*, with Dani telling us, "Item shops and the minigame where you can earn extra minerals come from *Penguin Adventure*. The vertical platform climbing was inspired by *Rainbow Islands*. End-of-level bosses are reminiscent of *The Maze Of Galious*, as are the items that enhance or assist the protagonist. And in *Bubble Bobble*, there are bubbles that form a word and grant an extra life; something similar happens in *Rocketman*."

So what can players expect from *Rocketman* from a gameplay perspective? "The game consists of five worlds, each containing nine levels that must be explored vertically to complete them," says Dani.

GREAT GRAPHICS

<INTRO> ARTIST TONI GALVEZ GIVES US MORE FROM BEHIND THE SCENES </INTRO>

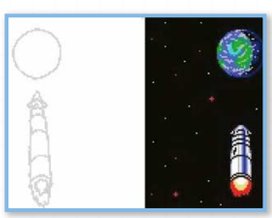


THE BIG BOSS

<"I designed four of the five bosses in this game, not only the look, but also their behaviour." />

NEW BACKGROUNDS

<"In most old games, the boss background was always black – I am very proud because my bosses have backgrounds." />



MAXED OUT

<"If you look at this picture, I have used hardware sprites over background characters to get more colours and detail." />

USEFUL TOOLS

<"I use Cosmigo Promotion, with the MSX Screen Mode 2 palette. It is really fast to pixel the graphics on this." />

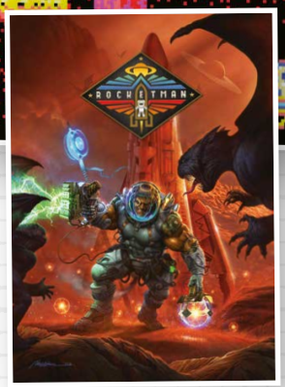
LOOKS FAMILIAR

<*Rocketman*'s jukebox, which is unlocked by completing the game, was drawn by Toni and based on a real Sony Boombox. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [MSX] ROCKETMAN IS A VERY COLOURFUL-LOOKING GAME WITH NICE SPRITE WORK. --->



<!--- ROCKETMAN'S STRIKING COVER ARTWORK IS BY ÁNGEL LUIS SÁNCHEZ. --->

<!--- [MSX] PLAYING ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS AGAINST DOKI. --->

"There are three different enemy types per world, each with completely distinct behaviours. Each world also includes its own item shop, a final-boss screen, and four bonus screens where players can collect minerals to purchase upgrades," explains Dani. "Inside the shop, you can gamble your minerals against DOKI, who challenges you to play rock, paper, scissors. The game features a relatively long introduction and two different endings depending on the selected mode."

In terms of coding Dani uses Visual Studio Code to edit code. "I also use openMSX with its built-in debugger to test, and for tiles, I use nMSXtiles and Tiled, Dani says. "For graphics, I use GIMP. For sprites, I use a web-based tool called TinySprite, and for the music, Gabriel uses Arkos Tracker 3." Gabriel 'Bitcaffe' Caffarena is *Rocketman*'s musician, while Toni Galvez provides sound effects and graphics (see the Great Graphics panel). Other artists involved include Oscar Centelles, Nenefranz, Errazking, and Daniel Perujo. "I did one of the start screens, the animation for the dragon on that screen, one of the shop characters (a cyber rat), and two screens for the endings. I mainly use Photoshop for assets and Aseprite for animations," Daniel tells us.

Rocketman is planned to launch in June at the AAMSX (Asociación de Amigos del MSX) meeting in Barcelona – visit rocketmanmsx.info for details. "It will be a physical cartridge for any MSX with 64KB RAM, packaged with a comprehensive manual and possibly additional surprises. There will also be an option to purchase it with a poster, and I'm considering producing a limited run of T-shirts," says Dani. The cover art is rather special as Dani . "I met Ángel Luis Sánchez at an Amstrad CPC users' meeting. He was the same illustrator who created many game covers for the Spanish company Zigurat during the Eighties and Nineties. Some elements in the game were directly inspired by the illustration he created." We're confident Dani's game is going to fly high and will review it soon. </BODY>

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Acorn Electron:** Previewed in **RG** 273, the brilliant *Chuckulus* from Snuggsy187 has now launched. Find it at bit.ly/chuckulus />

<**Atari XL/XE:** Brian Reifsnyder released his flicker-free Special Version of *Elite*. Dock with the AtariAge thread at bit.ly/elite-atarixl />

<**C64:** Donut80 have been converting their fun web games – *Egg Feud, The Last Pumpkin, Marshi N' Phoebe, Superstar Chefs*, and Traps N' Gemstones. Visit bit.ly/donut80-c64 />

<**Dreamcast:** The Dream Disc '25 jam had 20 great entries, which can be found at bit.ly/dreamdisc25 />

<**Game Boy Color:** *Echoes Of Worlds* is a Roguelike platformer from Team Calamar Studio, published by Homebrew Factory (50 Euros). Visit bit.ly/echoes-gbc />

<**MSX:** Mastropiero ported Sega arcade classic *Congo Bongo*. Pay a visit to bit.ly/congo-msx />

<**Nintendo 64:** *BotBoy64* from PsyOps Studio is a 3D platformer inspired by *Chibi Robo*. There's more info over at bit.ly/botboy64 />

<**Plus/4:** *Red Dwarf: Fiji Or Bust* is a light-hearted text adventure by Chris Snowden, released in memory of Rob Grant. You'll find it at by heading to bit.ly/reddwarf-plus4 />

<**Saturn:** *Celeste Classic* leaps onto Sega's console, thanks to en83. Jump over to bit.ly/celeste-saturn />

<**Steam:** *Battle For ASCIION* is Relevo's horizontally scrolling shmup, made with ASCII characters! Shoot on over to bit.ly/asciion />

<**TIC-80:** ZAP brings us *Retro Gunner*, an awesome vertical shmup. Download for Windows at bit.ly/retrogunner />

<**VIC-20:** Misfit unleashed the superb *Gravzronox*, inspired by *Thrust* (requires 32KB expansion). Fly on over to bit.ly/grav-vic20 />

<**ZX Spectrum:** zxpresh released the excellent 48KB run-and-gun *Hell Yeah* and the impressive *Sweet Fightin'* +2 (128K only), featuring 12 familiar 'World Warriors' (top). Check out zxpresh.itch.io for more information />

CHAMPION CODER

JASON J RAILTON (JOEFISH)

<INTRO> JASON WORKED MIRACLES WITH THE 48K SPECTRUM TO PRODUCE THE HORIZONTAL SHMUP GO-GO BUNNY GUN </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: FARNBOROUGH, UK WEBSITE: BIT.LY/GOGOBUNNY FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM PREVIOUS GAME: GO-GO BUNNYGUN (ZX SPECTRUM 48K) WORKING ON: UN-NAMED PLATFORMER, NEW SHMUP />

<!--- JASON'S PREVIOUS WORK INCLUDES THE CHARADE ENGINE FOR MAKING SPECTRUM GAMES. --->

WHAT IS YOUR DEVELOPMENT SET-UP, JASON?

<It's all on PC, using Crimson Editor to write in assembly, with hotkeys to compile the code (PASMO assembler) and launch it in ZXSpin for testing and debugging. Full-screen graphics are done in ZX Paint, and TAP files are put together in ZX Block. I've written my own sprite editor. I emulate it on a Nintendo DS using all the extra button inputs. I sketch out ideas on it whenever I have a moment to spare. />

HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE SO MUCH COLOUR AND LARGE, DETAILED GRAPHICS?

<The sprites are larger than a lot of Spectrum games at 24x24 pixels, but that lets me fit in more colouring possibilities. The larger they are, the larger steps of movement you can get away with, which makes them quicker to draw. Each sprite has a mask so you can recolour parts of it, giving you different player characters and more variety in the enemies. Bigger enemies are sprites moving in formation; you can see the separate pieces when they explode. />

HOW DO YOU MAKE THE VISUALS STAND OUT?

<The stippling lets me draw things darker, so the backgrounds didn't clash with the action, along with halving the amount of memory needed. Carefully spacing the details lets me use more colours. It's also less conspicuous when I'm cutting out big black squares around sprites to avoid colour-clash. />

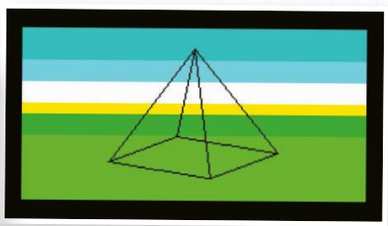
ANY PLAYING TIPS?

<Blue orbiters dish out power-up tokens; match the colour to your current pilot, and you'll power-up. Gold orbiters drop sweets – collect five in a level for an extra life, but some are hidden. Heidi's orbiting 'Hoon' serves as both shield and battering ram. For the dragon, hit the tail first to knock out its shield, then go for the head. />

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?

<I have a couple of ideas for a multicolour platform game. I've been refining leftover graphics I couldn't fit into *Go-Go BunnyGun*, so there may be another shmup to come. />

<!--- [NINTENDO DS] JASON'S SPRITE EDITOR, SHOWING HEIDI FROM GO-GO BUNNYGUN. --->



<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] "THE OTHER AREA I KEEP EXPERIMENTING WITH IS 3D," SAYS JASON, WITH THIS BEING AN EARLY EXAMPLE. --->

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] JASON'S INFLUENCES INCLUDED GRADIUS ADVANCE (AS SEEN IN THIS FIRST BOSS) AND DELTA (C64). --->

DATA BURST

IMPOSSIBLE MISSION III

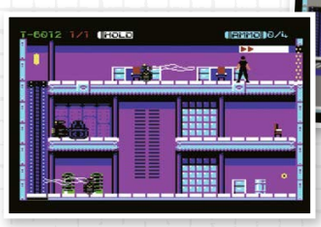
<INFO FORMAT: C64 CARTRIDGE/DIGITAL DOWNLOAD CREDITS: ICON64 (DEVELOPERS – TREVOR STOREY, STUART COLLIER, SAUL CROSS) AND PSYTRONIK (PUBLISHER – JASON MACKENZIE) PRICE: TBC WEBSITE: PSYTRONIK.ITCH.IO/ (DIGITAL) PSYTRONIK.BIGCARTEL.COM/ (PHYSICAL) />

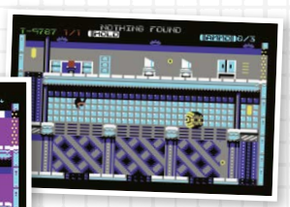
<BODY> **The amazing intro to this officially approved sequel reveals Elvin Atombender survived his fall at the end of *Impossible Mission II* – and is hacking computers to launch another global missile strike.** Agent 4125 parachutes in, searching furniture to find the 36 pieces of circuit board needed to disable the Master Circuit Board. Robots, including new types, patrol Elvin's lair. These exhibit different behaviours, shoot electricity, and can kill the agent on contact. Falling off the base of the screen will also prove fatal. Deaths cost time based on the difficulty level (with Easy, Normal and Hard settings) which countrs down from the 9,999-unit timer.

The player must find ammo to refill their EMP Repeater pistol; this can shoot a robot and disable it. Other useful equipment includes explosives to blow holes in weak platforms, fuses to activate lifts, safe keys to unlock safes, and the EMP pulse to knock out all robots in a room. Coloured keys open the barriers between sections. The heritage is brilliantly respected, with the somersaulting agent and classic robots, while the modern touches add depth. There is backtracking and only one map (meaning no procedural generation to add variety), but it controls so well. This is a superb sequel and an excellent game that will keep C64 fans, new and old, engrossed. </BODY>

SCORE: 94%

<!--- [C64] THE REPEATER NEEDS AN AMMO CLIP BEFORE YOU CAN REFILL IT FROM AMMO CRATES. --->





<!--- [C64] SEARCHING TAKES TIME, SHOWN BY A DECREASING BAR, WHICH CAN BE TENSE... --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] THE SCARECROW CAN SEND YOU HOME ONCE YOU FIND HIS SPELL BOOK AND SEVEN MAGIC PATCHES. --->

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] NOT EVERY TREAT YOU THROW WILL HIT THE TARGET, AND REPLENISHING YOUR HEALTH IS VITAL TO WINNING. --->

GUMBALL IN TRICK-OR-TREAT LAND

<INFO FORMAT: GAME BOY COLOR CREDITS: MEGA CAT GAMES (PUBLISHER) AND EXQUISITE LAUNDRY PET LLC (DEVELOPER) PRICE: $12 DIGITAL DOWNLOAD / £31 CARTRIDGE ONLY / £38 BOXED CARTRIDGE WITH MANUAL WEBSITE: BIT.LY/GUMBALL-GBC / BIT.LY/GUMBALL-PHYSICAL />

<BODY> **Turned into a gumball and sent to Trick-or-Treat Land, you must return home with the help of a magic scarecrow.** What follows is an *Undertale*-inspired RPG mixing humour with quirky battle mechanics. Exploring can lead to a turn-based battle, where you throw Treats at an opponent to harm them. You can use Skills, use items such as Potions, or cast Spells when you have learned them. Talking to NPCS and solving problems will lead to a magic academy, a dark wood, and the dangerous Mean Street. The cute graphics and music work well, while the smoothly increasing difficulty and fun plot will keep you playing. This is a sweet treat for Game Boy Color fans. </BODY>

SCORE: 90%

<!--- [MEGA65] THIS TREASURE CHEST TURNED OUT TO BE A MIMIC THAT IMMEDIATELY ATTACKS THE WARRIOR! --->

<!--- [AMIGA] THE WIZARD CAN FIRE MAGIC MISSILES IN THE DIRECTION HE FACES, MAKING UP FOR HIS WEAK STRENGTH. --->

ROGUECRAFT DX

<INFO FORMAT: AMIGA, MEGA65, GAME BOY COLOR CREDITS: THALAMUS DIGITAL (PUBLISHER), BADGER PUNCH GAMES/RETRO COGS/ROCKETSHIP PARK (DEVELOPERS) PRICE: $9.99 DIGITAL / £34.99 PHYSICAL (AMIGA, MEGA65) / £44.99 (GAME BOY COLOR) WEB: THALAMUS.LINK/ROGUEDX-AMIGA / THALAMUS.LINK/ROGUEDX-MEGA65 / THALAMUS.LINK/ROGUEGB-GBC />

<BODY> **Originally launching on Evercade, the enhanced version of *Roguecraft* has transferred to Amiga and MEGA65.** With gorgeous isometric graphics and an impressive soundtrack, one of three characters (Warrior, Rogue and Wizard) makes their way through a dungeon filled with Lovecraft-inspired monsters. Shane McCafferty's clever GBC version uses an overhead view, retaining all the features of the game – including mysterious potions with changing properties, secret rooms, newly added Achievements, and gold chests to plunder. The Roguelike gameplay and procedurally generated levels will keep you playing, making all three versions an essential purchase. </BODY>

SCORE: 92%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> MARCO ANTONIO DEL CAMPO (MAC) INTRODUCES VESPERTINO WORLD RACING, THE IMPRESSIVE FORTHCOMING AMSTRAD CPC RACING GAME </INTRO>

<BODY> **With 24 races in 12 locations, including Indianapolis, Stuttgart, Monte Carlo and Dakar, and eight different cars based on real vehicles, there's a lot to look forward to with *Verspertino World Racing*, which was inspired by *Lotus 2* and *OutRun 2*.** "With more than 2,600 sprites modelled in Lightwave 3D and Blender, we want a fluidity of movement above the norm seen in 16-bit racing games," explains MAC. "*Vespertino* will have extra RAM and ROM inside the cartridge, providing very fast, smooth movement at full screen using overscan, while car customisation and economic management elements help to increase replay value. We have more than ten songs to choose from; some lean more towards a retro, chippy, nostalgic vibe, while others are modern and fast paced." The development team is Rhino (programming and game design), MAC (graphics and game design) Toni Gálvez (3D graphics), TotO (cartridge design), José A Martín Tello Tello (musician for *Risky Woods* and PC Fútbol, his first time composing for a racing game) and Raft McMillan (music). "We'll be hitting the grid "sooner than many people think," suggests MAC. We can't wait to take the final game for a spin. </BODY>

<!--- [AMSTRAD CPC] GAMEPLAY MODES WILL INCLUDE VWR PRIZE RACING AGAINST THE CLOCK, ALTERNATING MULTIPLAYER TOURNAMENTS, AND PRACTICE MODE. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

BE THE BATMAN

This month the team talk about the many, many Batman games

DARRAN JONES

MARTYN CARROLL

TIM EMPEY

The Ultimate Guide to *Batman* in this current issue got us talking about the various videogames featuring the Dark Knight – good, bad and ugly. The conversation naturally turns to the *Arkham* series, but begins with the earlier games developed by Ocean Software.

DARRAN
So what was everyone's first experience with *Batman* games? It was the isometric Ocean game right?

MARTYN
That was my first experience, the one written by Jon Ritman. Such a great game and as far as I'm aware, the only *Batman* game based on the goofy Sixties TV series starring Adam West.

TIM
The precursor to *Head Over Heels*? Nope, it was the movie adaptation of *Batman* for me.

MARTYN
I remember that well, particularly the Amiga version. It couldn't really fail. Ocean had Mike Lamb programming the platforming bits, and Jon O'Brien, who did the Z80 versions of *Chase HQ*, handling the 3D driving scenes. A top team.

DARRAN
I made the mistake of playing the Amiga version first before the Amstrad version. Needless to say the side-on Batmobile levels were quite the come down. Conceptually they were the same, but didn't look quite as cool.

MARTYN
The Batmobile and Batwing sections were 2D on the 8-bits, right?

DARRAN
Yup, that's right. They're still very well done of course, but they're obviously not a patch on the 16-bit versions. Did anyone like the cool one that came out a little later that featured all the comic-book panels?

MARTYN
Yes, the Special FX one. Designed by the late, great Joffa Smith. The presentation was excellent. I remember Joffa saying that even back then, DC Comics was really protective over the licence, needing to approve everything. All of the Ocean *Batman* games were excellent, but there were a lot of terrible ones…

DARRAN
Oh man, where do you start? The *Batman Forever* arcade game was utter tosh. There's an N64 game that was total pants. *Batman Begins* was absolute bobbins as well.

MARTYN
I remember *Batman Begins*. At the time I was editing a gaming tips mag, and I had to write a ten-page guide on it because there were no other big games to cover. Nightmare.

» [SNES] Batman turns brawler in the POW-tastic Super Nintendo version of *Batman Returns*.

DARRAN
That can't have been fun.

MARTYN
Page after page of "Run down this corridor, punch that guy, grapple up that wall…" Not my finest hour.

TIM
I reviewed *Batman Begins* and was asked to rewrite it because I just slagged it off for being a film licence, and didn't mention much about what you actually did in the game.

MARTYN
Well, you didn't do much at all really. It was so routine it was painful. It certainly didn't need a guide. It looked nice though.

DARRAN
So before we inevitably move onto the *Arkham* games, what were the good old-school

» [PlayStation 2] Despite some half-decent stealth elements, EA's *Batman Begins* tie-in is not a winner with the **RG** team.

» [Mega-CD] To the Batmobile! The driving sections in the enhanced disc version of *Batman Returns* are worth the price of admission alone.

» [ZX Spectrum] *The Caped Crusader*, plays out in overlapping, comic-book-style panels.

Batman games that everyone liked to play?

MARTYN

For me, definitely the first Game Boy one. It played like *Super Mario Land* with Mario swapped out for a mini-Batman. Sunsoft's two NES games are also great, particularly the second one, *Return Of The Joker*. The graphics are incredible for the NES. It looks even better than the later Mega Drive version.

TIM

So it turns out I never played a *Batman* game between 1989 (the movie one) and 2005 (*Begins*). That seems pretty odd looking back. I do want to have a look at *The Adventures Of Batman & Robin*, which is based on the amazing animated series.

DARRAN

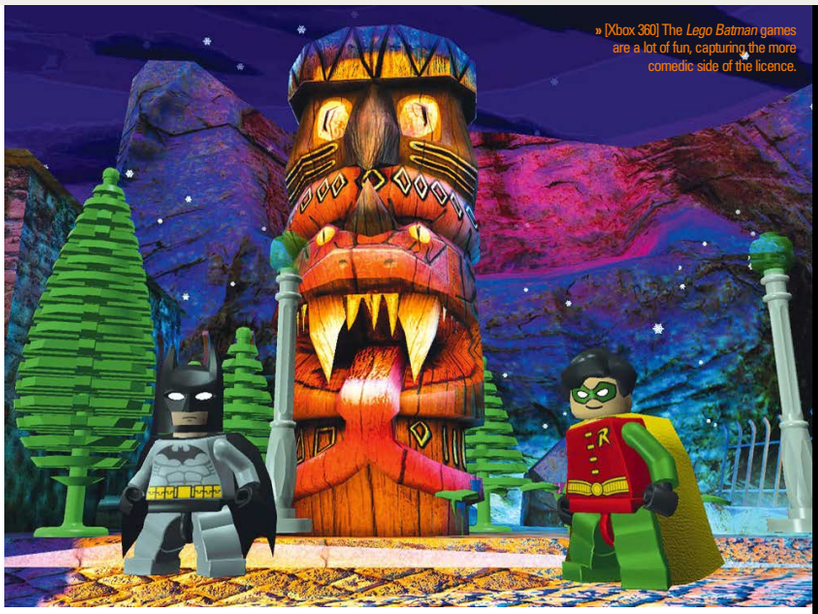
The Adventures Of Batman & Robin games are great. I'd love to get Making Ofs on those. *Batman Returns* was an interesting one, because most of the versions were completely different to each other. The SNES version slapped but it was quite tough, and the Mega-CD *Batman* game has some thrilling driving sections.

MARTYN

So the *Arkham* games. Why did they resonate so much? I've played *Asylum*, which I loved, but for some reason I never played the others.

DARRAN

I remember being ridiculed by Ryan King because I said *Arkham Knight* looked boring, because it was a big open world with about four things to do in it.



» [Xbox 360] The *Lego Batman* games are a lot of fun, capturing the more comedic side of the licence.

> "The Adventures Of Batman & Robin games are great"
> **DARRAN JONES**

TIM

Excellent combat, good puzzles, cool gadgets. And to quote the end of my review of *Arkham Asylum* in *360* magazine, "For a while you're the goddamn Batman." Which, of course, I ripped off from Frank Miller's truly terrible *Batman* series.

DARRAN

I loved *Arkham Asylum*, as it's a proper Metroidvania. I thought *City* was fine, but I've never played the others. Should I?

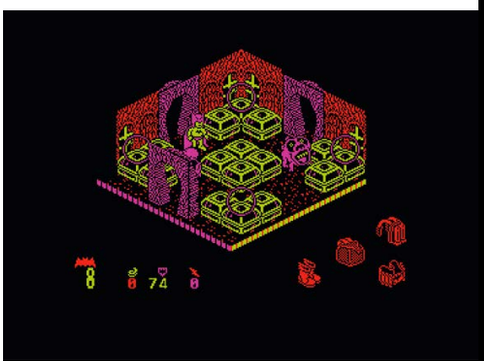
TIM

Definitely. But if you don't fancy that there's a load of *Lego Batman* games to try.

DARRAN

In all fairness I've got the *Lego Batman* games on Steam as I got them in a really cheap sale. I'll give them a playthrough as I've heard there's more than four things to do in them. ✱

» [PlayStation 3] Rocksteady's *Arkham Asylum* is a class act, redefining the character for a new generation of gamers.



» [Amstrad CPC] Holy vivid colour scheme Batman! Our hero makes his videogame debut in Ocean's 1986 licence.

READERS REACT

Where you share your favourite Batman games

Dave
I'll have to give it to *Arkham City* on the merit of being the 'complete' Batman experience: action and detective work, Kevin Conroy and Mark Hamill, Gotham City as a character, deep lore cuts all over, and an open world with many secrets and Easter eggs to find. That said, I do have a soft spot for *Batman Returns* on the SNES. The enemies felt iconic, and the sound design was brilliant for its time – it made punching enemies feel fantastic.

Robb from 8/16/32bit
Batman Returns on the SNES. A brilliant brawler that is far superior to the platformer we got on the Mega Drive.

Lynx in VR
Batman Returns for the Sega CD. The pseudo 3D effects while driving are still mind-blowing to this day and a great showcase of the Sega CD's extra capability. Same goes for *The Adventures Of Batman & Robin* on the same system.

MegaApple
Batman, Sunsoft, NES. Simple, yet utterly fun. And a killer bass use in the OST.

Mark
Arkham Asylum. A stealth and combat Metroidvania with gorgeous setpieces and satisfying boss fights, all narrated by Mark Hamill's Joker.

Arctic Panda Popz
Arkham Asylum. The dark dystopian vibes mixed with excellent combat and gadgets. Also Mark Hamill's Joker steals the show.

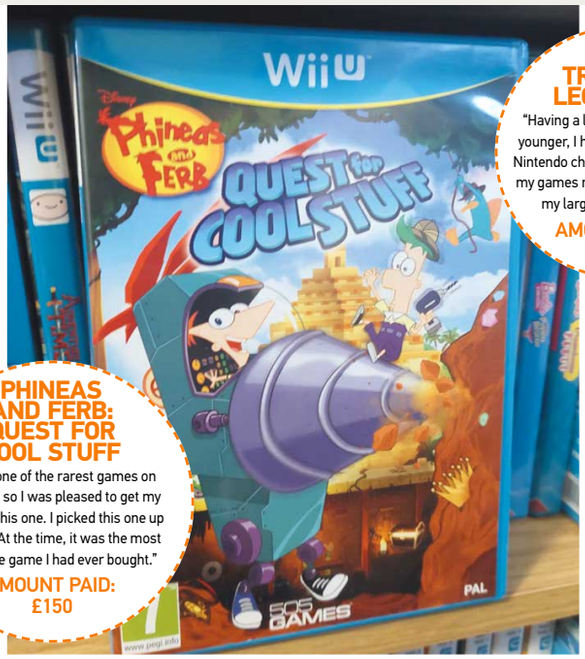
David Neil Robinson
Arkham City, but I have the most hours on *Arkham Origins* which is unfairly ignored. Yes it's got a different voice cast but the story is really good and it has the best traversal across the map.

am87
Arkham City. *Asylum* nailed the gameplay, but I've never felt like the story was up to much. *City* elevated everything – before it crashed back down to Earth with *Arkham Knight*.

Kay (MS04)
Lego Batman, mostly because it's the only one I've finished but also because you can play as a ton of the villains.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

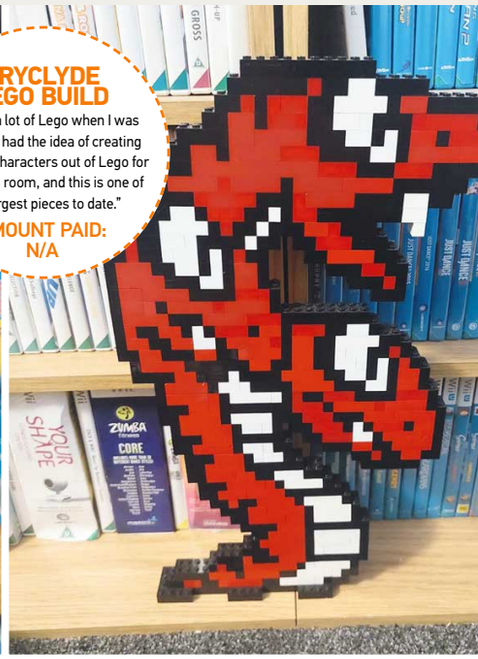
READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**



PHINEAS AND FERB: QUEST FOR COOL STUFF

"This is one of the rarest games on the Wii U, so I was pleased to get my hands on this one. I picked this one up on eBay. At the time, it was the most expensive game I had ever bought."

AMOUNT PAID: £150



TRYCLYDE LEGO BUILD

"Having a lot of Lego when I was younger, I had the idea of creating Nintendo characters out of Lego for my games room, and this is one of my largest pieces to date."

AMOUNT PAID: N/A

WII COLLECT TOGETHER

Aaron Jones combines his love for collecting Wii games with Lego building

Words by Faith Johnson

BIO

NAME:
Aaron Jones

LOCATION:
Redruth, Cornwall

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£21,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Super Nintendo

FAVOURITE GAME:
Super Mario Bros 3

YOUTUBE:
@Gamingcreations4

Aaron's current collection consists of hundreds of Wii and Wii U titles, but his love for gaming started much further back. "I first discovered gaming by playing on consoles such as the Atari and the Nintendo Entertainment System, which were both owned by my dad," he explains. "My love for gaming really took off playing *Super Mario Bros 3* and then owning my own first console with my brother Kyle, the Super Nintendo. We spent many hours playing *Super Mario World* and *Super Mario Kart* in what was then our shared playroom and often had our friends round to join us in gaming sessions."

So when did Aaron start to take collecting seriously? "Collecting came later in life, as we did not own too many games and only had a handful for the consoles that we had growing up," Aaron explains. "When I moved into a much bigger house and had the room to keep a lot of my games and consoles, that is when the collecting really took off. For me, gaming and having a large collection were always something to aim for, but I also felt it was having a room that you love and want to be in, and was happy to show off."

It's not just collecting videogames that Aaron has as a hobby, and he tells us about connecting his passions together. "My other hobby is Lego, which I combined with gaming to create 2D sprites of Nintendo and Sega characters into 3D Lego pieces, which I hadn't seen in the numerous game rooms I had previously visited. It feels great to have something so different from so many other collections."

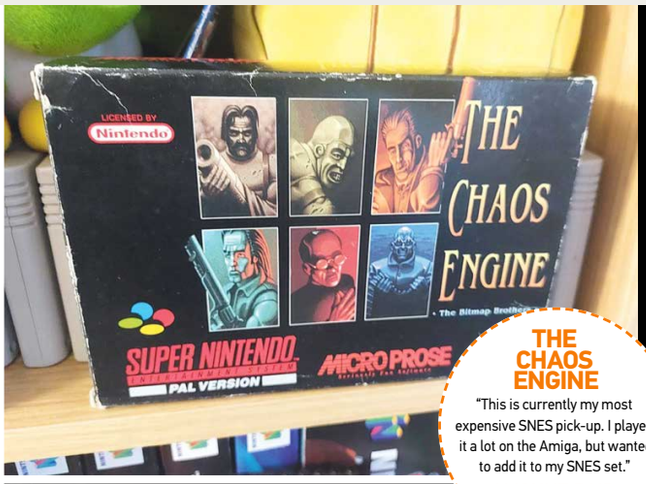
As with many other collectors, Aaron has had some great bargains over the years, but which was the best? "The biggest bargain I had was *Scribblenauts Unmasked*, a DC Comics adventure for the Wii U. With this game being an Australian PAL game, I thought this one might be expensive and hard to come by. Luckily for me, one day I was scrolling for Wii U games on eBay, and one came up for the same price as the UK *Scribblenauts* game."

So did that bargain lead to Aaron collecting Wii and Wii U games? "I never had a fondness for collecting for the Wii and Wii U," he admits. "I think it was more about picking something achievable in a short space of time, and it was relatively inexpensive to pick up games at good prices. Once I got a few quickly, it grew into the challenge of completing the full Wii U set within a year, which I was very close to, barring three games. This gave me the ambition to do the same for the Wii set, but the mountain is a lot higher with the volume of games to collect for the console. I'm certainly enjoying the challenge, and this has grown with the addition of my YouTube channel."

We finish up by asking Aaron what the Grail item for his collection would be. "For me, owning *Super Mario Bros 3* with the left-hand side Bros box would be a big Grail, being my favourite game of all time. My other small Grail for the Wii set is *Battle Vs Chess*, which I'm still actively hunting for."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

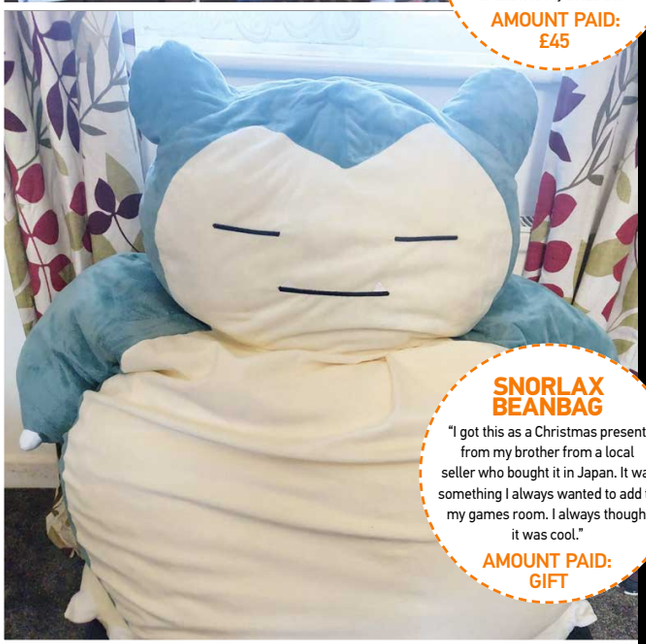
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social



THE CHAOS ENGINE

"This is currently my most expensive SNES pick-up. I played it a lot on the Amiga, but wanted to add it to my SNES set."

AMOUNT PAID: £45



SNORLAX BEANBAG

"I got this as a Christmas present from my brother from a local seller who bought it in Japan. It was something I always wanted to add to my games room. I always thought it was cool."

AMOUNT PAID: GIFT

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

POKÉMON CRYSTAL

■ "I had an early love of playing the *Pokémon* games from buying and owning *Pokémon Red* and *Yellow*, so when the new ones came out, I picked them all up on release day."

PAID: £35

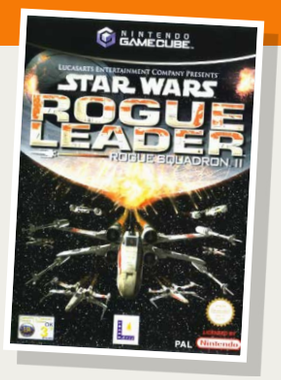
BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

STAR WARS: ROGUE SQUADRON II: ROGUE LEADER (GAMECUBE)

The price is not strong with this one, as a complete copy in good condition costs as little as **£10,** with mint copies rarely costing more than **£20.**

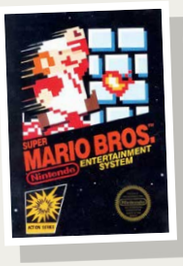


LUNAR JETMAN (ZX SPECTRUM)

No astronomical savings are needed to land this Ultimate classic, as it ranges in price from **£8** to **£12** depending on its condition.

LEGO STAR WARS II: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY (PLAYSTATION 2)

Bargain hunters may be able to find copies for under **£3,** but most good condition copies cost about **£6.**



SUPER MARIO BROS (NES)

Condition largely controls the range of prices for this NES banger. Loose PAL carts start at about **£15,** to hundreds for a complete copy in great condition.

SKYFOX (C64)

This Electronic Arts release doesn't come up often, but does only cost around **£7.50** for a complete copy when it does surface.

BATMAN (AMIGA)

The sheer popularity of the *Batman Pack* means there are lots of copies out there, so you won't have to spend more than **£10** to add this to your collection.

PSYVARIAR (PLAYSTATION 2)

There's no need to blast your wallet as this PAL shmup ranges from **£4** to **£12** depending on its condition.

MR DRILLER: DRILL SPIRITS (DS)

Loose cartridges of Namco's puzzler can be dug up for only **£5,** while good condition complete copies shouldn't cost more than **£15.**

HOW MUCH?!

POCKET REVERSI

This PAL copy of *Pocket Reversi* for the Neo Geo Pocket Color handheld reversed the buyer's savings by over **£3,200** in a recent auction.

Prices correct at time of print

» [Dreamcast] Devastating super moves can be the difference between winning and losing a bout.

IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM

» **DEVELOPE:** CAPCOM

» **PLATFORM:** DREAMCAST

» **RELEASE:** 2000

» **PRICE TODAY:** £175+

» » [Dreamcast] Training helps with learning new moves and experimenting with different character combinations.

» » [Dreamcast] The team you choose will mostly be decided by your own fighting style.

PROJECT JUSTICE: RIVAL SCHOOLS 2

Released late in the Dreamcast's life, this Capcom fighting game stood out from the typical ninjas, street fighters, and monsters by featuring rival school teams battling it out to protect Japan and secure justice. It now packs a punch to your wallet as well

Words by Faith Johnson

THE GAME

Project Justice: Rival Schools 2 is a 3D fighting game that was released on both the NAOMI arcade board and the Sega Dreamcast in December 2000. It's the sequel to *Rival Schools: United By Fate*, released in arcades and on the original PlayStation. While it's known as *Rival Schools 2* in Europe, it was titled *Moero! Justice Gakuen* in Japan, which translates to *Burn! Justice Academy*.

The main gameplay feature is a team system that allows members to combine for super attacks or to stun enemies using lessons such as synchronised swimming.

The story is set one year after the events of the original game. Following a sustained peace among the rival schools, Kurow Kirishima, an assassin seeking to rule Japan, hatches plots to subdue the schools, each of which has a branching story. Many of the stories in the game intertwine based on the characters you select and the choices you may make after certain fights or events.

There are several notable modes to play in the game. The Free Mode involves selecting a team of three characters to fight bouts, eventually leading to a rather tough boss fight. Defeat the boss, and your team is ranked based on the overall performance during bouts. The Arcade Mode includes all the storylines, and there are different multiplayer options, including leagues and tournaments. The Training Mode is the place where you can tweak combos and try out different character combination attacks.

» [Dreamcast] You'll be doing lots of tag-team moves throughout most of your fights.

» [Dreamcast] There is a great anime story to follow for each team, with some cool artwork

THE QUALITY

Major Mike reviewed *Project Justice* in issue 150 of *GamePro* and felt it was an excellent game. He started his review by comparing the gameplay to *Street Fighter EX* before explaining that, "*Project Justice* earns an excellent report card in almost every aspect. Graphically, the visuals shine with bright colours and polygonal characters loaded with fine details to match their personalities."Describing *Project Justice* as "superficially above average", *Official Dreamcast Magazine* only scored it 6/10. It praised the variety of combos and moves but felt the fighting style was "sloppy and unbalanced".

In the *Next Gen* issue 75 review, Chester Barber felt Capcom's game was "not for everyone" but that the characters' "Japanese high school-inspired costumes are a cut above the usual for that sort of thing". He also wasn't a fan of the controls, saying that, "Executing some of the more difficult combos will take practice because of the sloppy, sluggish controls."

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

The main reason this one has a high price is that it was only ever released for the Dreamcast and in the arcades. There had also been no further releases on newer consoles until 2025, when it was released as part of the latest Capcom fighting game collection.

Since the new release, original Dreamcast copies have come down in price by a small amount, and more copies have started hitting the market over the last year or so, which is good news for collectors. We shall wait and see, but it may be that *Project Justice*'s price actually comes down in the future.

That said, this is still sought-after by Dreamcast and fighting game collectors and has consistently held a high price over the years. We also need to acknowledge that it was one of the last Dreamcast games released, and there would most likely have been a low print run to begin with.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

The best alternative to playing on original hardware is to buy *Capcom Fighting Collection 2* for the PlayStation 5, Switch, Xbox Series S/X, or Steam. It was released alongside *Power Stone* and *Street Fighter* titles in 2025. Not only does it include *Project Justice*'s arcade port, but the online options mean you can test your skills against other players from around the world. There are also high-score challenges, display filters and save states that add some modern quality-of-life features to the collection.

Another option is to import a Japanese copy of the game, which can be found for half the price of the European or USA release most of the time, even with import fees considered. The game is still mostly in English, so the story can be understood, and menus can still be navigated with relative ease.

» [Dreamcast] Time it right to blow the enemy aside with a climactic super-move finish.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Project Justice is a great fighting game that tries something a bit different with its team system and comedic storylines. Being a Capcom fighter, lots of the special moves use *Street Fighter*-style inputs, such as d-pad rotations and charging, so the moves and specials may feel familiar to many. A purchase may depend on how much you like anime-style storylines and art, or if you're looking to try something beyond the mainstream Capcom fighting games. ✱

I'VE GOT IT!

This collector is too cool for school

Vorsprung durch zauberkraft

It was actually my first-ever Amazon purchase via a friend's dad all the way back in 2001! If I remember correctly, I paid a total of £29.99 for it.

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

SELLING UP

Darran's day at the Bournemouth Gaming Market

As many of you know I've been moving away from retro gaming and focussing on collecting 1/6 scale action figures by companies like Hot Toys and INART. To fuel my new obsession I've been selling off numerous parts of my collection since the beginning of the year, which has included my entire Game Boy Advance collection, virtually all of my SNES games and a large number of Switch titles.

My N64, Mega Drive, Saturn and DS collections won't be going anywhere because they're far too important to me, but everything else is fair game and places like the Bournemouth Gaming Market are a great place to get rid of unwanted games. So with that in mind I thought I'd share my experience there in case you're thinking of downsizing your own collection and want some useful tips.

My aim at these shows (this is my third in the last ten years) is always to sell, so that means hopefully offering the most competitive prices possible. Generally I go through all my games the week beforehand and make sure that they're priced at least ten percent cheaper than what you'll find in CEX or on eBay. If it's under a fiver my prices will generally be the same. This is probably the most tedious part of the experience, but if you want a decent return it's also the most important. One of the benefits private sellers like me have over traders is that we're not out to make a profit so we can do things like greatly reduce stock as the day goes on.

If you are going, be sure to take a helper or two with you, as it can get very busy, you'll need cover for a comfort break at some point and you need to keep an eye out for potential thieves (I've never experienced this myself, but it can happen). My wife Melanie and my youngest daughter Alice came with me (as they did back in 2019) and we've now got a good system in place. We have our own cart to get everything over to our table and then we try and set things up so that everything is in some sort of order and it's all displayed alphabetically.

We actually arrived too early on this occasion but it gave us a chance to look around some of the other stalls. There were certainly less stalls than London, but that's to be expected with a new venue, as some traders will be cautious about attending. I also had traders coming over to buy things from me before we opened. Generally I don't mind stuff like this. If people want to sell on their own stalls that's fine, I just like getting rid of stuff, so the more I can shift the happier I am, particularly if I'm still getting a good price.

> "The first hour at these shows is always hectic"
>
> **DARRAN JONES**

The first hour at these shows is always hectic, with people swarming your stall, asking questions and wanting to make purchases. Someone on RLLMUK advised me to take a card reader and I'm so glad I did (thanks gospvg). While a few people were turning up with wads of cash, many wanted to pay everything on card whether it was £180 or £6. I used SumUp which takes a two percent commission, but I'm sure there's other options out there.

Being autistic I found the day incredibly challenging and draining. I hate making eye contact or small talk at the best of times, so being fully switched on for six full hours was quite the task and I was absolutely knackered. My daughter, who also has ASD, would often disappear outside and go for a walk (a benefit of living in and knowing the area). Having said that, I did meet some lovely readers and caught up with a few friends, so it was absolutely worth all the stress. I even got to sign a copy of the mag, which was nice.

Overall, I had a great day at the show. I felt it was well organised, there were a lot of visitors and a good variety across the available stalls. It certainly wasn't as busy as London, but it's one of the most popular debuts the organisers have had (over 1,700 tickets were sold) and the market is definitely returning in 2027. I'd imagine I'll return next year to sell off the things that didn't sell this year. After all, I always want new dolls. ✱

Special thanks to Aaron Wren for supplying images of the other stalls. ✱

TIPS AND TRICKS

HOW TO DO WELL AT A GAMING MARKET

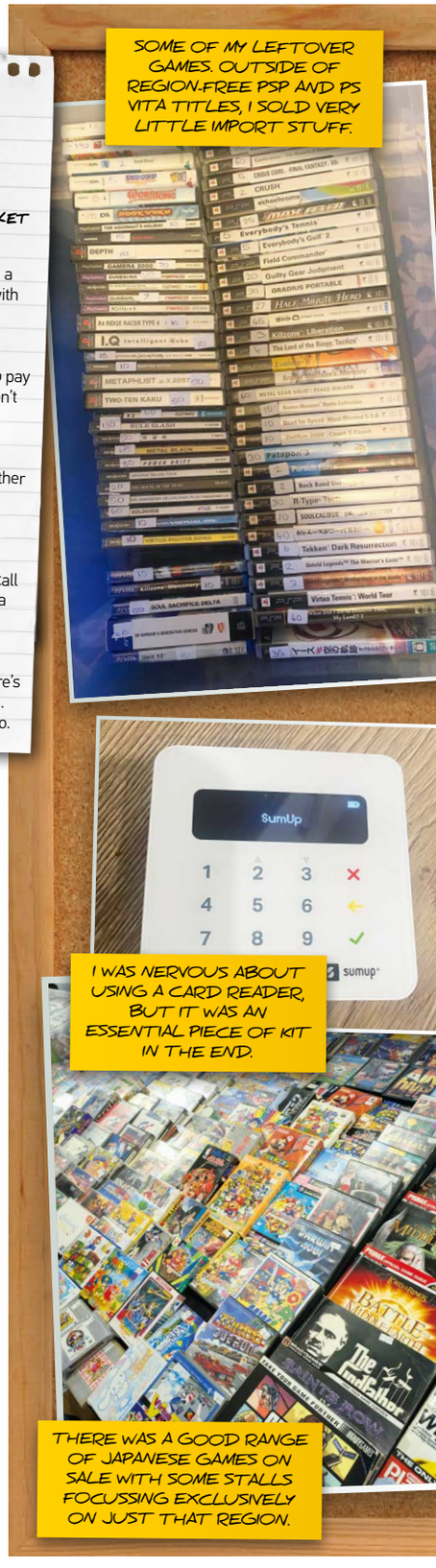
PRICE SENSIBLY
It's tempting to use eBay pricing due to having a captive audience, but you'll get better returns with lower prices.

GET A CARD READER
Yes you'll pay commission, but everyone wants to pay by card, so you'll be losing out on sales if you don't take one with you.

ORGANISE
Keep all your games from different systems together and alphabetise everything. Buyers will really appreciate it.

GET HELP
Friends and family allow for more eyes on your stall and can manage if issues crop up (like needing a quick loo break).

TRADERS ARE FRIENDS
If you've got stuff left over at the end of the day there's a good chance a trader will take it off your hands. Just remember that they need to make a profit too.


SOME OF MY LEFTOVER GAMES. OUTSIDE OF REGION-FREE PSP AND PS VITA TITLES, I SOLD VERY LITTLE IMPORT STUFF.
I WAS NERVOUS ABOUT USING A CARD READER, BUT IT WAS AN ESSENTIAL PIECE OF KIT IN THE END.
THERE WAS A GOOD RANGE OF JAPANESE GAMES ON SALE WITH SOME STALLS FOCUSSING EXCLUSIVELY ON JUST THAT REGION.
SumUp
sumup

IT'S ALWAYS NICE TO MEET READERS AND I HAD A GREAT TIME CHATTING WITH AARON.
THERE WAS A GREAT AMOUNT OF VARIETY TO BE FOUND IN THE STALLS, WITH ALL SORTS OF GAMING MERCHANDISE AVAILABLE.
ALICE AND I ARE ALL SET UP FOR CUSTOMERS. THE GIANT STALL BEHIND US BELONGS TO CONSOLE PASSION.
PRICES RANGED ON THE DAY FROM VERY CHEAP TO VERY EXPENSIVE. THAT STRIDER IS A GOOD PRICE, BUT HARMFUL PARK FELT A LITTLE TOO HIGH.
I ENJOY RUMMAGING THROUGH THE GAMES AT A MARKET AS YOU'LL NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL FIND.
THE OWNER OF THE CONSOLE PASSION STALL IS ANDY BROWN, WHO ALSO RUNS THESE MARKETS.
ALL PACKED UP AND READY FOR THE BIG DAY. THERE ARE A FEW MORE BOXES OUT OF SHOT.

MARKET BARGAINS

Readers share their retro-related gaming buys

logicalmynd
I was at a flea market in Surfside Beach, South Carolina (USA) around the mid-Nineties and a guy had an NES *Tetris* (Tengen) game cartridge. I didn't have any money to buy it, but I used to carry knives with me, so I traded the vendor a cheap but fancy butterfly knife for it. It was a near equal trade then.

peadargagotoku
I bought *Panzer Dragoon Saga* on eBay in 2005 for 90 Euros, which I thought was a lot at the time. The seller got really delayed sending it to the point I thought I had been scammed. As an apology they threw in a free game. That game was *Deep Fear*. [Wowsers – Ed]

David Couzelis
I found a complete boxed copy of *Klax* for the original Game Boy stuffed in a plastic drawer marked $2 (USD). It's a completely unique implementation compared to the US version which I'd bought recently, and I was excited to have a copy! This was at a gaming convention in CT in 2025.

Greg Roxburgh
Not a gaming market purchase, but I did get an N64 from a car boot for £2 in 2002 with a PSU but, "Sorry mate, no pad!" Parents were getting rid of it as their son had gone to uni and they were having a clear out! I'd have loved to see his face on his return!

Ross
I haven't been to a gaming market in a while. Last time I did prices were comparable to eBay listings, so no bargains to be had. I'm considering popping along to the one in Nottingham coming up, and maybe I might be pleasantly surprised.

Zebbe
I got the rare Swedish rental version of *Streets Of Rage 3* for 10 Swedish kronor (1€) at a retro game market event in Stockholm.

Dugan
I'm not sure about the best bargain, but I remember going to a gaming market and spotting *Rainbow Islands* for the PC Engine, and being shocked by the £70 price tag. Upon getting home I saw it was £100+ online! D'oh!

MAILBAG

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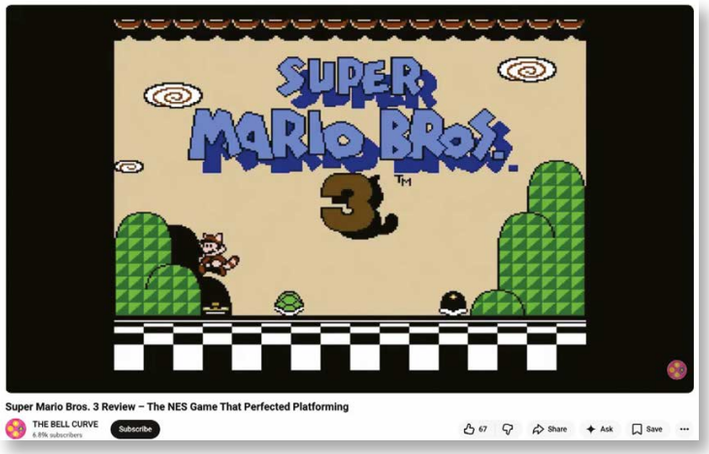

» The Bell Curve is already doing quite well, with over 6,000 subscribers. Let's try and boost that.

STAR LETTER

LOST LEGENDS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

As much as I enjoy reading your magazine, the news section has become quite the dour experience lately. It feels like every month we are losing more and more gaming legends (including your very own Nick Thorpe) and it means that each issue often starts off on a bit of a low. I find this section of the magazine bittersweet, for while it makes me look at my own mortality (some of the people mentioned are sometimes only a little older than myself) it also fills me with happiness when I think of the legacy they have left behind and the impact their games have had on me over the years.

So thank you for covering a very difficult topic and always in such a respectful way. Gaming history isn't brilliantly recorded as it is, so it makes the interviews you are able to get with people all that more important. Hopefully the next issue I read will be a little more uplifting.

Warm regards,

Jason Smith

» [Arcade] Yoshihisa Kishimoto is no longer with us, but he leaves behind a legacy of great games, including *Double Dragon*.

Thanks for writing in, Jason. Unfortunately, if you're reading this issue you'll have already read about the sad passing of *Double Dragon* creator Yoshihisa Kishimoto. As you pointed out though, it's important to share the legacy of these creators, even if it makes for some tough reading at times.

THE BELL CURVE

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

My name is Dean, and I am a Geography teacher at Harwich And Dovercourt High School in Essex. At the end of each half term, teachers deliver an Awe And Wonder lesson, centred around something they are personally passionate about. Mine has always focussed on videogames, which has proven to be a great way to engage students.

Last year, this naturally led to students asking me all sorts of questions about games – favourites, consoles and gaming experiences. Building on that enthusiasm, I created a YouTube channel where I review and produce retrospectives on both retro and modern games. A number of students have since subscribed, and it has become a genuinely rewarding way to share my interest with them.

This year, I set myself a small goal: to try and have the channel mentioned in a magazine. I will admit, I am not entirely sure how one goes about this, so I thought it best to simply ask.

A significant number of our students face challenges with literacy, and encouraging a genuine interest in reading is an ongoing effort. I believe that connecting their existing interests – such as gaming – with reading materials could make a meaningful difference.

I fully appreciate that space in the magazine is limited, but if there were any possibility of a small mention or shout-out, both the students and I would be incredibly grateful.

For reference, here is a link to my channel:

m.youtube.com/@Deanomite85

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this.

Kind regards,

Dean Bell, Head Of Geography

Thanks for reaching out to us Dean, and thanks for sharing your channel with us. There's some interesting videos on there and hopefully you'll now pick up a few more subscribers.

» Army Of Troll's incredible pixel art featured as a poster in issue 200 and was also on the cover.

POSTERS PLEASE

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

As a new subscriber I just got my second issue and was so happy to see the included poster! Amazing! Do you have a list of which earlier issues contained posters and what the poster was? I'm currently in the internal bargaining process of whether or not I should buy a *Link To The Past* poster from the Nineties for €60.

Again, as a new subscriber, a big thank you!

Cheers,

Kris

We're glad you enjoyed the poster, Kris. Issue 270 included a double-sided poster of *God Of War* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, while issue 257 had a poster featuring every RG cover and some classic Atari art. Issue 200's poster had a bigger version of the cover art by Army Of Trolls and a map of *Melkhior's Mansion*, while issue 179 featured Bob Wakelin artwork and photography of the Commodore 64.

SHARING MY COLLECTION

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I was wondering what I would need to do to get featured in Collector's Corner? I've built up

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» If you want a preview of Will's collection, you'll find it over at wmgaming.co.uk

a fairly extensive multiformat collection over the years (around 60 machines), covering everything from the Acorn, Atari and Amiga through to more unusual systems like the Apple Pippin, FM Towns Marty, and Samsung Nuon. I've also built a few machines myself where originals were out of reach, including a ZX80, Jupiter Ace and Comx-35. The centrepiece is a 3DO M2, along with a broader 3DO collection and a complete run of *3DO Magazine*.

I'd be happy to put together a proper write-up and photos if this sounds like a fit for the magazine.
Best regards,
Will Matthews

We're sharing Will's letter here as this is how most Collector's Corners start. We'll aim to get Will's fascinating-sounding collection into the magazine soon. If you have your own collection you'd like to share, simply write in and let us know.

THE BIG 300

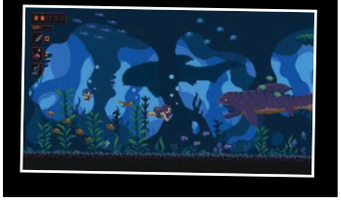
Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Since I cleaned up my game room last year, this weekend I decided to sort out my **Retro Gamer** issues. One issue even contains an interview with yours truly. However, this created a new need: can issue 300 of the magazine include a big index which includes all the old games you've covered? It might seem old fashioned, but hey, it's **Retro Gamer**. And if you think that's too much work, I'm sure our **Retro Gamer** community could make a collaborative effort.
Keep up the good work!
Rick 'Romanista' Lindeman

While it's a great idea, Rick, we're not sure how practical it would be. Retro Gamer has covered a lot of games over the last 20-odd years so it would end up being a gigantic list that would take up a lot of pages. Maybe we'd be better off creating a standalone 32-page mini mag, as issue 300 will most likely be a premium issue.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Enjoying the bank holiday

The team all enjoyed a four-day break. Darran stayed in a Haven caravan in Weymouth, found a cool gaming cafe called Sticks & Bones and completed *Primal Planet*, Tim completed several games, while Andy continued with his work on the *RTR: Imperium Surrectum* mod for *Total War Rome Remastered*. That leaves Martyn who did a bit of gardening, watched a few movies and saw his team Port Vale get trounced 7-0 by Chelsea. Ouch!



» There's an unofficial guide to all of the magazine's back issues over at bit.ly/parkproductions

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Star Wars game?

» [PC] It's not surprising so many readers love *KOTOR*, it's a fantastic game.

Robert August de Meijer
KOTOR is better than anything else *Star Wars* released in the last 40 years.

Lord Arse!
The first one I ever played, *The Empire Strikes Back* on the Atari 2600. Still stressful enough to bring on a sweat when that smart bomb chases after you!

David Couzelis
Rogue Squadron for the Nintendo 64! It felt like playing an actual *Star Wars* movie!

Guy Bailey
TIE Fighter. Not just for the gameplay and political intrigue, but being able to take the fight to the terrorists.

Kernow Fishy
Knights Of The Old Republic. It was an absolute classic and was my favourite RPG of all time until *Baldur's Gate III* came along.

Brandon M
I miss *Star Wars Galaxies*. It was an MMO that *Star Wars* fans got to rally around. Live in a galaxy far, far away. Build homes, explore huge maps, develop communities and fight NPC or player foes. Lots of great stuff in it.

Mac84 (Steve)
Shadows Of The Empire for the N64 and *Star Wars Trilogy* in the arcade.

Cherry Lambrini
Lego Star Wars The Complete Saga on the Xbox 360. It came at a time when my enjoyment of the films was at its peak. And the Lego games were still establishing themselves as a great series of licensed games.

Antiques For Geeks
Return of the Jedi – Death Star Battle on the Spectrum. As a kid who loved the films, I loved it. It's not the best *Star Wars* game, but I still enjoyed it when it was all I had!

planetmatt
The original sit-down arcade cabinet. It was the most amazing experience I'd ever had as an eight year old. The travelling fair had one in their arcade and I was so addicted, I stole money from my mum's purse to play it. I got found and dragged home and given a damn good thrashing. It was worth it.

retro GAMER

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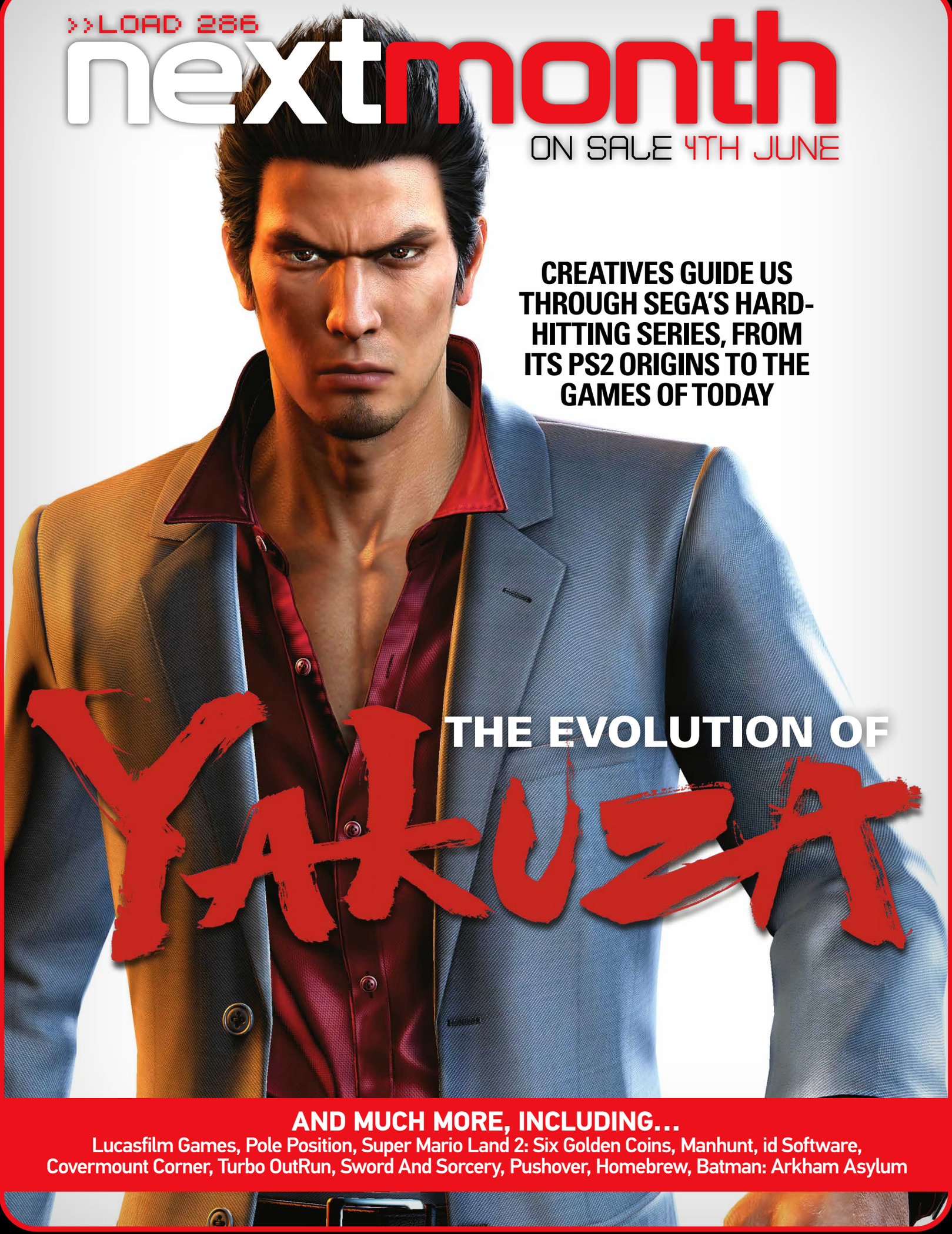

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Mr Driller: Drill Spirits

WHEN IMPORTING DOESN'T PAY

» NINTENDO DS » 2004 » NAMCO

It's not as relevant today, but in my youth importing games was almost always the way to go. They were often available ages before they hit Europe and if they were designed overseas they almost always ran better due to the sloppy PAL conversions we often got treated to.

I imported my first DS from the States, partly because it meant I could do freelance for *Cube* magazine, but also because it was out nearly six months before the UK release and I'm impatient. One of the first games I bought after my initial bundle turned up (which included *Super Mario 64 DS*, *Spider-Man 2*, *Feel The Magic: XY/XX* and *WarioWare: Touched!*) was *Mr Driller: Drill Spirits*, as I really enjoyed the Dreamcast version and loved the idea of being able to carry a similar game around in my pocket.

What I didn't realise at the time was that the US version of the game was missing a number of key features. I'm not sure why they didn't make it into the US release but appeared in the Japanese edition that arrived a few short days later, but they did and it was rather annoying. The biggest annoyance was not being able to play multiplayer off a single cartridge, but a character and game mode called Dristone Driller were also missing.

Knowing that these extras existed in other versions of the game wound me up immensely and I ended up selling off my US copy so I could play the game as the developers originally intended. When I decided to start collecting DS games again several years back, *Drill Spirits* was once again high up on my list, only this time I have a hybrid version of the game. While I bought a loose cartridge of the European edition, it now sits within a US box (because I don't like how much space the European cases take up).

The early bird may well catch the worm, but in this instance all I caught was a weaker version of a game. Needless to say I paid a lot more attention to reviews after that. ✱

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ENDGAME

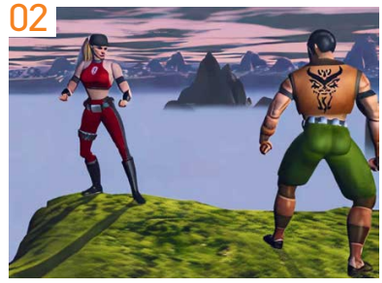
MORTAL KOMBAT 4
(1998, PLAYSTATION)

» The PlayStation version of Midway's fighting game updated the intro and endings cutscenes, redoing them as full-motion video – with hilarious results. Here we look at new boy Jarek's ending, which is the best (or maybe worst?) of a pretty bad bunch.

01

» Having defeated the evil Shinnok, Jarek confronts Sonya Blade atop a mountain plateau (in hindsight, not the best place to have a post-tournament decompression session). "The good guys won," says Sonya. "You're coming back with me." He mulls it over for one hot second.

02



» "Never!" he replies. Advancing, he explains that he only agreed to defeat Shinnok and will not turn himself over to the Special Forces. Sonya slowly backs up until she reaches the cliff edge. Again, why are they having this honest and open conversation *here*?

03

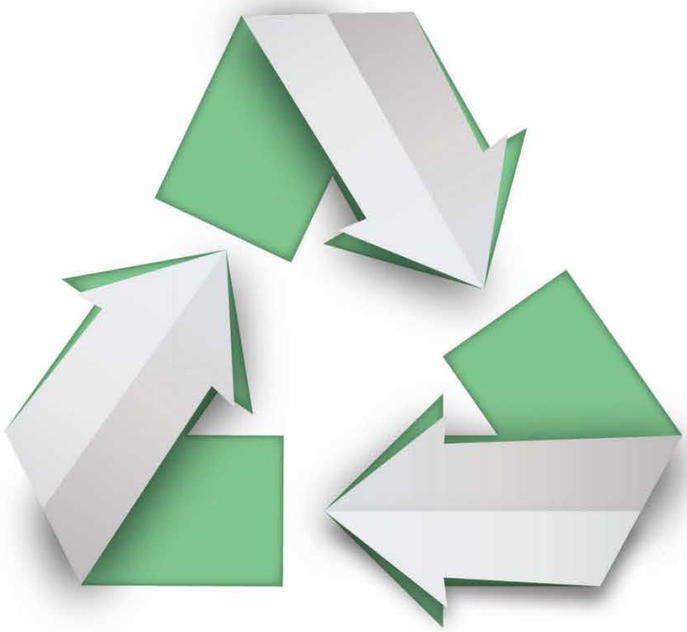
» Jarek lunges forward and Sonya casually side-steps out of his way. The big guy goes flying over the edge and disappears. "Aaaaggggghhhh!" he says, as he falls into the abyss. Unmoved, Sonya whips out her walkie-talkie and radios her boss, Major 'Jax' Briggs...

04

» Defying both physics and plausibility, Jared pops up out of nowhere and grabs Sonya's leg. Hanging onto the ledge with one arm, he flings her over the edge. It is now her turn to say "Aaaaggggghhhh!" As this is *Mortal Kombat*, there are probably spikes at the bottom.

05

» Jarek jumps up and spies Sonya's walkie lying on the ground. From it he hears Jax's voice. Muttering, he smashes the radio under his foot, silencing it. It's clear that Special Forces will not be happy about these developments and he'll be lucky to make the next sequel.



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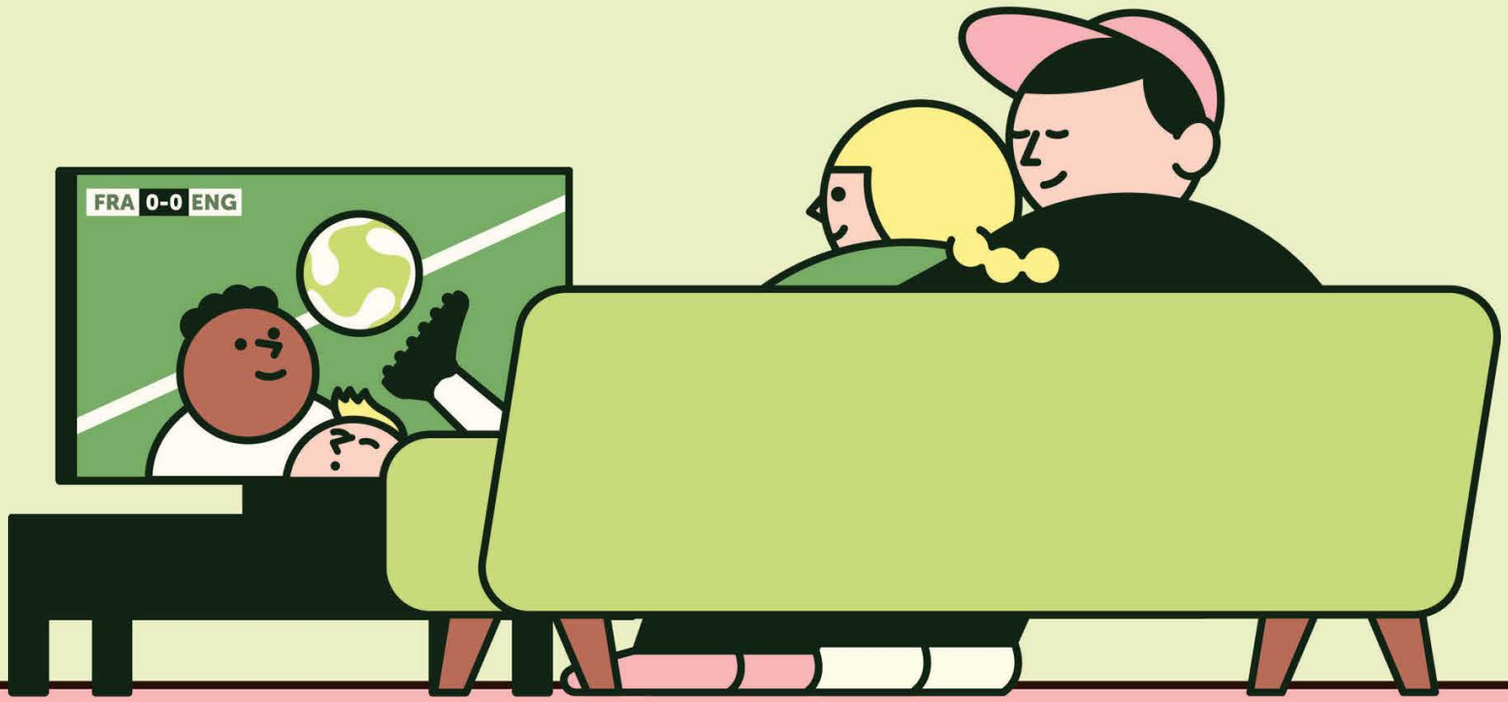

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